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20 Principles for Successful Community Organizing

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I've been a rabble-rouser and social activist for 45 of my almost 66 years, and have made my living as a professional civil rights, labor, and community organizer, as well as a performer. In my new political memoir, *Creative Community Organizing: A Guide for Rabble-Rousers, Activists, and Quiet Lovers of Justice* (Berrett-Koehler, 2010), I relate stories from some of the great social reform campaigns in recent American history, of which I've been privileged to play a part—including the Southern Civil Rights Movement, the Harlan County coal miner's strike, and the fight to abolish for-profit prisons and immigrant family detention. The book has lessons that I hope will inspire and motivate a new generation of community organizers and young activists—and anyone else who seeks to make an impact in their communities, from musicians and soccer moms, to teachers and politicians.

What follows is a list of take-away lessons and principles, a sort of manifesto for today's community organizers.

"Freedom, freedom is a hard won thing, and every generation has to win it again."

1. Most people are motivated primarily by self-interest. As a creative community organizer, you are always trying to figure out people's common self-interest, the glue that binds political organizations and movements.
2. Institutions and people that hold power over others are rarely as united as they first appear. If you can't get a person or institution to support you, you want to do everything in your power to convince them that it's in their best self-interest to stay out of the fight.
3. Start the process of strategy development by imagining that instant just before victory. Then, working backwards, do your best to figure out the steps that will lead to that moment.

4. It is generally useful, as a part of any creative community organizing campaign, to advocate for a positive as well as to oppose a negative.
5. The more complicated a strategy or tactic, the harder it is to carry out, and the less likely that it will be successful. You can ask a few people to do a lot of things, particularly if they're committed activists. If you want hundreds or thousands of people to participate in a campaign, you need to ask the great majority of them to do one thing, and only one.
6. You need to believe that human beings, no matter how much they may hate each other, can somehow find some common connection. To do that, leave your stereotypes at the door.
7. In real life and in actual campaigns for justice, the people are always partly united, partly divided. It's up to you to reinforce unity and to compensate for the divisions among the people with whom you work.
8. Don't ever let anyone tell you that demonstrations were only effective in the 1960s--that in the twenty-first century, we need to find other, less confrontational ways to make our voices heard.
9. Be absolutely certain that the people you work with truly understand the risks they're taking, the things that could go wrong, the losses they might suffer, before they make the decision to act, individually or together.
10. One of the greatest skills an organizer can have is the ability to frame and ask questions in ways that make people not only want to answer them, but also to think deeply, and in unexpected ways, about what the answers might be.
11. Laughter really is therapeutic, and hope does heal. Be cheerful in the face of adversity, and help others feel that way.
12. The more sure you are of yourself, of your experiences in other communities and campaigns, the more you have to struggle to avoid the arrogance of thinking you know what's right for other people.
13. When an institution that has a responsibility to everyday people fails to do its job, one option is to build another organization to challenge the first one and force it to do the right thing. The other option is not only to build an alternative organization, but to use it as the base for a campaign to take over the original one.
14. When those who have been without power gain it, there is no guarantee that they will exercise it more democratically than those who have had it before.
15. The power of culture can be an antidote to people's inability to see beyond their "own people" or situation. Culture can transform consciousness and make social change transformative rather than merely instrumental.
16. Organizers are often unjustly accused by those in power of inciting violence. That's a lie, and it needs to be put to rest. It's just a tactic the opposition uses to discredit your organization. To shut down a prison; to drive an exploitative enterprise out of business; to make sure a sexual harasser is fired--that is not violence. It's justice.
17. Go not only with what you know, but with whom you know. Even in the Internet age,

personal relationships still count, especially when you're asking people to do something. When recruiting volunteers, give them a specific list of campaign needs from which they can choose.

18. It's quite easy to slide from helping organize a community to becoming its leader and spokesperson--even though you're not really a member of that community.

19. We can never truly predict what human beings working together can accomplish, and therefore we can never compromise with injustice.

20. The beloved community of which Dr. King spoke, rather than something we reach some day in the future, may be something we experience a little bit every day while, as creative community organizers, we walk and work towards it.

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