

From *services* to *social change*

Cuts in public finances, a general mistrust of the political process and its ability to join citizens together in a sense of common purpose, combined with an ever weakening social environment, provide significant challenges to the government's aim to build the 'Big Society'.

A spectrum of new approaches need to be tried to find the best ways to design and implement collaborative solutions to social problems that involve partnerships between government, private and public service providers, neighbourhood groups and an active citizenry that is capable and willing to become local 'consumer producers' of advice, information, advocacy, mutual support and care.

However, we have a history in this country of focussing on 'single issues', of coming together to stop what we don't want to see happening rather than being proactive about social change and working together through broad based alliances to enhance the legitimacy, capacity and authority of local communities to resolve their own problems. Government departments, service providers and community organisations have operated in a mainly competitive environment for many years, some may have even become hostile to one another, and some have completely lost sight of social change and social justice as appropriate objectives. In order for them to join together in a common purpose with local communities, (and to fully accept that together they can do more than they can do working apart), a new culture of openness, generosity and trust will be needed.

Any such work needs to begin by identifying, in targeted areas, what people, resources, skills, expertise, energy, knowledge, time and opportunities are already available locally to be utilised for the common good.

Organisations and groups then need to act individually and collectively to make new connections and develop new relationships among and between what is available. This is the basis of all good Community Organising.

- 1) **Community Organisers.** Training should give equal importance to building relationships as to dealing with power issues, to fostering interdependence as to agitating for change. Community organisers can then help people to identify common issues, to gather together resources and to co-design and co-produce strategies for reaching the local objectives that have been collectively set.

Community Organising in ten easy steps:

1. Ask people how they think their lives could be improved and find out what each of them is prepared to do about it;

2. Think through with them the tactics necessary to achieve the changes that the majority (at least 80 percent) of them want to see; 'find the common ground and move forward together';
3. Take time to build caring and respectful relationships, discover people's interests and talents, use their connections and train up the natural leaders;
4. Find out who holds the power and meet with them face-to-face, preferably on your patch rather than on theirs.
5. Encourage local people to tell their stories and take action to influence those in power and to gain the support of the general public;
6. Keep the pressure on and make it fun; whenever you can, use humour to draw attention to your issues and to expose the flaws in the opposing arguments;
7. Always be mindful of alternative, constructive ways forward, and be prepared to negotiate; remember that among politicians there are 'no permanent enemies and no permanent friends';
8. Remember that most people simply go along with the status quo and it only takes a well organised 2% to 3% of the 'body politic' to initiate social change;
9. Make sure you maintain an equal balance between a hard head and a big heart;
10. The "Iron rule" – Never, never do for others what they can do for themselves.

2) Civil servants, LA workers and service providers need to be trained and supported in adopting a **co-production approach** to the design and delivery of services.

If they do not ask for and value contributions from those they are trying to help – the general public, their 'service users' and their families, friends, neighbours and the wider community – then people are unlikely to feel connected and, worse still, will think that they have nothing to offer. Like community organisers they need to ask local people what they want to see in their area and what they are prepared to do to make it happen.

The message that needs to go out to individuals and communities is: 'We can do it together, but we cannot do it without you.' Unfortunately, the message that too often goes out, albeit unconsciously, is: 'We are here to help you but you have little that we value or need.'

A simple self assessment process needs to be introduced to pose questions like:

1. Do you ask your members, users, clients, patients or participants what they enjoy doing for others?
2. Do you look out for regular opportunities for them to help others?
3. Do you welcome their involvement in the running of your organisation, and do you log the time that they work for you?
4. Do you ask them to pay back for the specialist services they receive from you, by giving more general help to others?

5. Do you organise opportunities for mutual support between peers, either one-to-one or in groups?
6. Do you participate in local events and community activities alongside your 'service users' and their families, friends and neighbours?
7. Do you set aside, say, ten percent of any budget allocated for a community initiative to say 'thank you' to people when they get involved

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