Radical

Taking It to the Community: Democratic Organizing & Transformation Beyond the Organization

When we collaborate with organizations committed to becoming diverse, equitable, anti-oppressive, inclusive and just, a common trend we consistently encounter is that the change makers who are fomenting **internal** systemic (culture) change invariably express a deep hunger to dismantle the systems, structures, and policies that marginalize and oppress people in the **external** communities where their organization is located. In other words, they wonder how to imbue social innovations within these communities that will sooner, rather than later, ameliorate the disenfranchisement and human depreciation confronting people of the community every day.

Social innovation, as such, is not new. There is a long, although not necessarily successful, history of public authorities, along with private and voluntary organizations, imposing usually well intended reform initiatives upon communities, with the intent of *moderating elements* of dysfunctional systems and policies rather than replacing them whole cloth. The flaw in this approach is that the so-called solutions are imposed upon the community rather than being developed in partnership and at the direction of the community.

The change makers we work with typically recognize that they must make a conscious shift away from this kind of "imperious innovation" because it is not sustainable. An embrace of a radically different approach that is anchored in solutions that are crafted with people, not for them. Therefore, where do they begin? Three core conundrums must be considered up front:

1. How does the community function?

2. What's required to craft sustainable solutions to local challenges?

3. How will the community "come together"?

Five stages of a community's evolution

To have a collective impact within the community, organizational change makers must assess the stage the community is presently at. There are five distinct stages[1] that define where a community is on an imagined continuum at any given point in time:

1. **Hold:** Although it is apparent that something is not quite right in the community, people cannot clearly and accurately articulate what the major and minor contradictions are. Consequently, the community feels stuck.

2. **Gridlock:** Community members can articulate what plagues the community, however, people cannot agree upon what actions need to be taken. Consequently, there is an impatience for change.

3. **Commotion:** Although there are pockets of change within the community that create a sense of the possibility of significant and sustainable change, a lack of trust between organic community changemakers and the community at large empowers the status quo.

4. **Advancement & Expansion:** A common sense of purpose, contributes to the advancement of community-wide actions that result in tangible changes.

5. **Endure:** Despite tangible progress in improvements of community life, deep concern and ambiguity revolve around the next actions that will protect and sustain these achievements.

Classes of social innovation

Another consideration is that change makers, who can now more accurately be called social activists, must identify the class or kind of social innovations that are potentially appropriate in the short and long term[2]. Three classes of social innovation are at hand to effect community transformation. They can be pursued singularly or in tandem:

---

[1] Ruede & Lurtz, "Mapping the various meanings of social innovation: Towards a differentiated understanding of an emerging concept", EBS Business School Research Paper Series, 12/2003
[2] Harwood, "Putting Community in Collective Impact, 2015"

1. **Social Good Innovations:**
   Broad-based "technical innovations" are pursued. This is the realm of social entrepreneurship, where startups and entrepreneurs develop and fund business opportunities that directly address social issues and will "ultimately have a positive impact on the community".

2. **Transform Social Structures & Policies via Reforms:**
   Existing "social innovations and practices" are modified and reconfigured to attempt once again to resolve social problems and contradictions. This is the realm of moderate socio-technical and economic reforms that usually cast a spotlight on "society" writ large, rather than targeting a specific community with robustly unique and specific contradictions to be resolved permanently.

3. **Community Transformation:**
   The emphasis here is upon the crafting of progressive social innovations that are focused upon transforming the systems, policies and structures that have historically disempowered, marginalized and oppressed people and groups within a community. These same community individuals, groups and organizations not only assume the power and authority to co-create transformative policies, systems and structures to sustain life within the community, but they also gain a deep sense of solidarity and self-determination.

Inventory community assets

The kind of community action planning that is key to community transformation (social innovation) necessitates an inventory of the assets that exist with a community at a given point in time. Commonly there are six groups of community assets:

1. **Financial** – Local economy and capital.

2. **Built** – Fixed assets supporting well-being.

3. **Social** – Human networks that facilitate trust and cooperation.

4. **Human** – Health, knowledge, skills and motivation.

5. **Natural** – Stock of renewable and nonrenewable resources.

6. **Political & Cultural** – How people see the world and influence distribution of resources.

Radical EQ ®

Democratic organization

We come back to the beginning. Clients are reminded that when venturing out to their community(s) to engage in the kind of community transformation (social innovation) suggested here, innovations that will improve the well-being of the people of the community must empower people at the local level to invent together (co-create) solutions to the economic, social, and political problems confronting them.

The residual but nonetheless important effect is that people of the community, by co-creating essential solutions, move beyond fear to hope; beyond despair to optimism about their ability to change their circumstances and protect the vitality and dignity of the community. They no longer see themselves as victims but as people pioneering new, more human responses to the contradictions afflicting their community. What are some of the signposts that this kind of social innovation is actually democratic?

- **Bottom Up Organizing:** People directly affected work together in solidarity and mutuality. They are heard and continually provide the insight, forethought and credibility to strategies and action plans that are implemented.

- **Just Relationships Are Built:** People treat each other with justice and respect, both individually and organizationally.

- **People commit to self-transformation:** Communities evolve from operating "in the mode of individualism" and instead create an ethos and practice of community centeredness. "We must be the values that we say we are struggling for and we must be justice, be peace, be community."[3]

---

[3] Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing, Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, Jemez, New Mexico, Dec, 1996.