The New Generation of Organizers

The progressive movement is seeing a resurgence of younger organizers thanks, in part, to the "Obama effect" of the 2008 campaign, and a renewed attempt to articulate values and build authentic relationships.

By MARSHALL GANZ & KATE HILTON

In 1831, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to investigate American democracy. He worried that citizenship would turn into a series of arid exchanges between isolated individuals and a powerful state as political equality eroded social relationships rooted in family, church, and guild.

Instead, de Tocqueville found a vibrant society, sustained by civic associations that drew people from individualism into shared interests. The fact that these associations were voluntary meant that they could be a source of renewal of civic values. A combination of equal voices could, to some extent, balance domination by those with greater resources. Making democracy work required the creation of collective capacity.

This is what organizers do.

Organizers exercise leadership by taking responsibility to enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. Unlike political “marketers” who sell causes, candidates, or commodities by appealing to the preferences of their customers; unlike philanthropic “providers” who dispense services to needy clients; and unlike social “entrepreneurs” who devise technical solutions to challenging public problems; organizers identify, recruit and develop leaders. They build community around that leadership and create power from the resources of that community.

Today the progressive movement is seeing a new resurgence of young adult organizers. Certainly, there is the Obama effect. His presidential campaign trained 3,000 full-time organizers, most of them in their 20s; it organized thousands of local leadership teams (1,100 in Ohio alone); and it engaged some 1.5 million people in coordinated volunteer activity.

Obama also managed to glamorize the art of community organizing in his memoir, Dreams of My Father. He wrote about meeting with people in their homes and churches, listening to their stories, the failures and the victories. Obama said: “it was the best education he ever had.” Young people see the experience Obama got from community organizing—his concern, the way he relates to everyday people—and they want those same skills.

But what skills are involved in community organizing, and how are young adult organizers putting them into practice?

Young Adult Organizers & The Five Organizing Practices

From the Courage Campaign to the immigration reform movement to the Episcopal Diocese, organizations are capitalizing on the momentum that the Obama campaign generated. These organizations are recruiting young adults with or without experience in organizing and training them in the leadership skills taught at Camp Obama, which include the mastery of five distinct practices:

Build a Public Narrative

Values-based organizing invites people to escape “issue silos” and come together as complete human beings whose diversity is an asset to collective effort. As the source of the moral energy that it takes to organize, values are communicated as a narrative. Organizers can learn to inspire others by learning to tell their own story, a story of experiences shared with others, and a story of an urgent challenge that demands action.
When Obama introduced himself to the nation at the Democratic National Convention in August 2004, he told his public narrative. He told a story of his calling to public office, reminded us of our calling as Americans, confronted us with urgent economic, social and political challenges, and inspired us to make choices to realize our vision of who we are. Obama’s mastery of motivating others into action energized his audience around core values that had been dormant among Democrats for years: equality, community, interdependence, and dignity. It was not that other political leaders did not share these values; they were simply unable to bring them alive in ways that could animate a constituency into action. Obama’s gift and skill for telling his story of hope lit the spark for a movement, especially among the young, a movement of “moral reform” in the best American tradition.

When Hope Wood, then 28 years old, heard Obama’s 2004 DNC speech, it “awakened the hope inside of me that I could make a difference.” Wood vowed then and there that she would “get political” when Obama ran for office himself. In 2007, Wood got her chance, and with no organizing experience, she attended a “life-changing” Camp Obama in Los Angeles where she “was born a community organizer” when asked to tell her public narrative to 200 other volunteers. As a mixed-race white/Mexican closeted lesbian who was married, she was afraid to reveal her true calling to the campaign, even to herself. But in finding her voice, Wood found that she could be an effective organizer by articulating her values and building authentic relationships with others based on those values.

Wood went onto organize “Obamawood,” a local field team that grew from four to 500 by the Iowa caucus, ending at 1000 strong on Election Day. Her team used public narrative to motivate others to take action—to vote for Barack Obama. They went house-to-house and phone-banked weekly, meeting at Tangier, a local bar, for every return and debate-watching party. Wood is now the Northern California Field Manager for the Courage Campaign’s Equality Program in Oakland, and she and three other field staff support 34 volunteer organizers to mobilize others to take action for LGBT equality in their local communities.

As Wood learned, public narrative is a practice that can be structured, learned, and shared. This focus on mastering the craft of storytelling permeated the campaign through YouTube, campaign Web sites, and, perhaps most dramatically, Obama’s “race” speech, delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, which concluded with the “story” of Ashley, which came from a South Carolina house meeting. As a leadership practice, public narrative enables organizers to articulate their core values encourages trust among them, and enhances their efficacy by enabling them to engage voters far more effectively than the use of traditional scripts, talking points, or messaging.

**Establish Relationships**

As de Tocqueville noted, the process of association—not simply aggregation—makes a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As such, relationship building goes beyond delivering a message, extracting a contribution, or soliciting a vote. The “lateral” connections, entirely missed in canvassing, telemarketing, or most e-mail driven operations, are what create the “glue”—or social capital—that sustains volunteer engagement in the face of challenge, inspires creativity in the work, and supports reaching out to diverse social networks to engage the broader community.

Obama campaign organizers learned the craft of one-to-one and house meetings that laid the foundation for local organizations, rooted in the commitments people made to each other and not simply to an idea, task, or issue. At a training session modeled on Camp Obama for youth organizers in the immigration reform movement, Jose Luis Marantes, age 23, learned the art of a one-to-one meeting. Marantes grew up in Hialeah, Florida, a Cuban-American center outside of Miami. Marantes’ mother, a medical billing clerk, immigrated in 1970 and his father, a mechanic, arrived here in 1980. Marantes was raised mostly by his grandparents, and he credits them for his ability to build relationships with people of any age.

Marantes is now a youth organizer at the Florida Immigrant Coalition & Students Working for Equal Rights as part of a youth immigrant reform movement for the Dream Act, a piece of proposed federal legislation that “would provide certain illegal immigrant students who graduate from U.S. high schools, are of good moral character, arrived in the U.S. as children, and have been in the country continuously for the last five years prior to the bill’s enactment, the opportunity to earn conditional permanent residency.” In support of this legislation, Marantes spends his days dedicated to building relationships with others.

In one-to-one meetings, Marantes initiates, develops, and renews working relationships with volunteers. A key distinction between organizing and mobilizing is that he is not simply trying to get a signature, a donation, or a pledge of support. Successful one-to-one meetings lead to house meetings in which the “host” invites a broad network of associates to attend—some of whom agree to hold their own meetings, activating the networks that weave their way through every community.

**A Team Approach**

Structured leadership teams encourage stability, motivation, and accountability, using volunteer time, skills, and effort to effectively advance the team’s goals. Teams create structure in which energized volunteers can actually accomplish real work and communicate a practical vision of leadership that can often result in shared purpose, clear norms, and well-defined roles.
Carlos Saavedra, a 23-year-old undocumented immigrant organizer and the son of a professional Peruvian soccer player, grew up in Lima before his parents moved him to Boston, Massachusetts. At age 16, Saavedra got involved in a campaign to grant in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants through the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA). In 2004, although the bill passed both chambers of the state legislature, Gov. Mitt Romney vetoed it. Saavedra recalls that the campaign leadership left after the loss, invoking a sports theme inherited from his father: “There is a big difference between playing a game and playing on a team. And we needed to structure a team so we could play to win.”

Saavedra now works in Washington, D.C. as the national coordinator of the National Dream Act campaign, organizing teams of young adult immigration reform organizers. Saavedra structures teams as the fundamental organizational unit on which the campaign structure is built. Each team, in turn, accepts responsibility for achieving the shared purpose of mobilizing volunteers within specific turf. Ultimately, Saavedra’s goal is to see an army of young adults developing their leadership skills and working together locally, regionally and nationally to solve the problems that their communities face by generating collective power.

Form a Strategy

Challenging the status quo requires making up for a lack of resources by creatively using available resources. Power depends on the participation of the powerless; and strategy is most dynamic when the group responsible brings diverse experiences, background, and resources together. As organizers work toward clear outcomes, they learn from successes and failures to adapt tactics.

Erin Sweeney, 26, is a strategizer who grew up in a working class community in rural New Jersey. She entered the Foreign Service to pay for her college tuition and while working for the United States government, she had to be strategic in how she organized local leaders in Lagos, Nigeria, the location of her first assignment, where resources were lacking. Each day after work, Sweeney built relationships, developed team structure, and strategized with Nigerian consulate staff; and together they organized a three-week effort to renovate a dormitory for troubled girls and orphans in September 2009. Awarded the Secretary of State Award for Volunteerism, Sweeney and her team made up for a lack of resources in Lagos by creatively using available resources within her new community.

Take Action

Organizers take measurable action, allowing for evaluation, accountability, and real-time adaptation based on experience.

There is a big difference between making something actually happen, and hoping, wishing or dreaming that it will happen. Engaging teams in collective action poses particular challenges that require greater craft than organizing as a “lone ranger.” Moving significant numbers of people into coordinated action requires doing detailed thinking, anticipating contingencies, providing accountability and support, conducting training—all “craft” activities that need to be viewed as central to the action itself, or there is likely to be no action. To bring “craft” to organizing work, it is important to focus on measurable outcomes, numbers of specific commitments, deadlines and responsibilities.

Action-based measurements appeal to Nicholas Hayes, a 23-year-old organizer for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts Hope in Action campaign. Working as an intern in the Diocese’s Relational Evangelism Pilot, Hayes is organizing a team of college students at MIT’s Episcopal Chaplaincy to mobilize MIT community members to give one percent of their annual time or income to poverty-alleviation.

Hayes sees himself as an organizer who is “calling individuals to form a community that heeds our individual and communal responsibility to address social injustice (which nominally, Christians—and progressives, for that matter—are supposed to care about) by taking action.” Hayes is “part of a church that is learning to take literally Jesus’ injunction to love him by ‘feeding the hungry and clothing the naked,’ not out of a spirit of condescending ‘service’ but of brother- and sisterhood.”

Conclusion

Hope Wood, Jose Luis Marantes, Carlos Saavedra, Erin Sweeney, and Nicholas Hayes are motivated to organize because they can make a difference that they can see and feel through the practice of leadership skills: communicating a public narrative, building relationships, establishing a team structure, devising a strategy, and spurring action.

Community organizing is also something that is no longer ambiguous to the outside world, a fact quickly discovered by Christina Sanchez: the oldest of five daughters to Mexican immigrant parents in Los Angeles, and the first member of her family to go to college. Sanchez, 26, attended Yale University and in 2008, she volunteered with the Obama campaign at Latino-led fund-raisers. She is now working to keep the network of Latino organizers connected through the New Latino Movement, an organization dedicated to offering organizing trainings to the Latino community and to encourage young adult organizers to join the ranks. Sanchez credits the Obama campaign as not only the source of her professional inspiration, but the reason why her family and
friends know what she is: an organizer. “They respect my profession as though I were a teacher, nurse or firefighter. I don’t think that would have happened before.”

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