

An ABCD Community Partnership

- *Owned and controlled by local people*
- *Desired outcome: local people act as productive citizens vs local people receive services*
- *A community organization that engages the wider community as an engine for ABCD.*
- *Seeks resources both inside and outside the community*
- *Both cooperative and challenging; building connections among people and groups and at times challenging institutions for social change.*
- *Broad participation—every member of the community has gifts to offer, not just designated leaders*
- *Inclusive—there is no one whose gifts are not needed.*

V

Organizing an ABCD Community Partnership

What is an ABCD community partnership?

A group of parents form a group to develop youth jobs in partnership with local businesses. Neighbors organize to influence the city government to provide more recreation services. A group of congregations develop a learning exchange that connects people who want to teach and learn such things as guitar playing, gardening, or computer skills.

Each of these efforts began in the same way: a circle of well-connected local people formed a community partnership. This partnership worked together towards a purpose that involved their community in action. In this kind of partnership –sometimes called a community organization–most members

are everyday citizens, not the staff of helping agencies. Local citizens and their associations are at the center of decision-making and are the principal producers of outcomes. A community partnership is the most powerful vehicle for mobilizing the community. This chapter outlines the community organizing steps that build a citizen-centered community partnership.

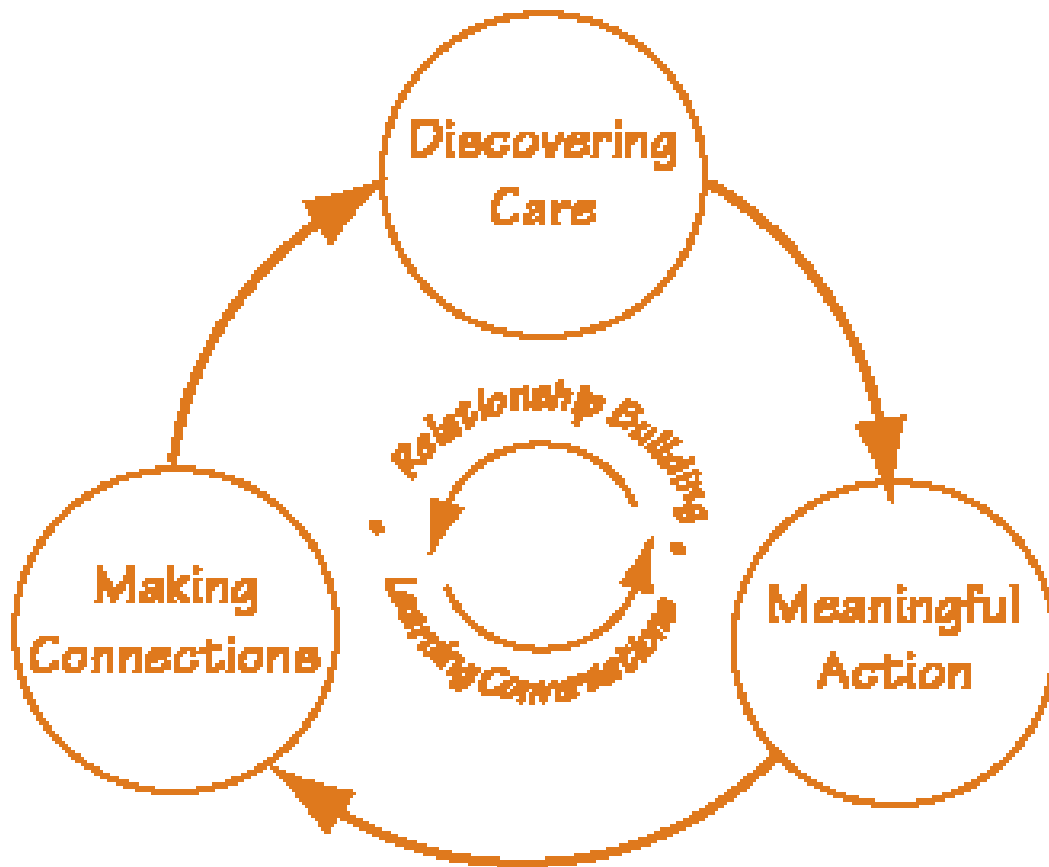


Community Organizing

Community organizing brings together people and groups in a community to act on what they care about. Organizing may build a growing circle of people who take collective action –like the partnership that developed youth jobs did– or a network connecting diverse people –like the partnership that created the learning exchange did. Historically, community organizing in the United States has brought together people without power so they have a voice in decision making to influence local institutions. The battle has been to get a seat at the table of power for those usually left out. In addition to improving the accountability of business and government, community organizing has also developed local partnerships that act for other purposes such as mutual aid, economic development, and inclusion of marginalized people.

When people who differ in many obvious ways learn about what is truly important to each other, a connection often emerges in which the learners find common purpose. We differ in a thousand ways; age, size, ethnicity, race, religion, belief, history. And yet the more we dwell on what is most important to us, the more we discover what we care about in common. For example, most everyone has similar dreams, fears, and hopes about their children’s future. When we share dreams about our children, a common ground emerges that unites us and moves us. ABCD organizing seeks this source of energy, which is activated by expressing and acting on shared meaning. Conversation starts the energy moving towards more relationships and more meaningful action.

Think of organizing as moving repeatedly through a circle of three interacting activities: conversations to discover what people care about, meaningful action upon what people care about, and the connections that grow among people who act together. This circle of conversation, action, and connection is a community development structure that can widen through a community like the ripples from a pebble dropped in a pond. Human beings seek meaning naturally, and organizing is a process to lead people to meaning. Energy and life reside in this circle of meaningful conversation, action, and relationship. These three activities are different manifestations of the same inner reality, the beating heart of community.

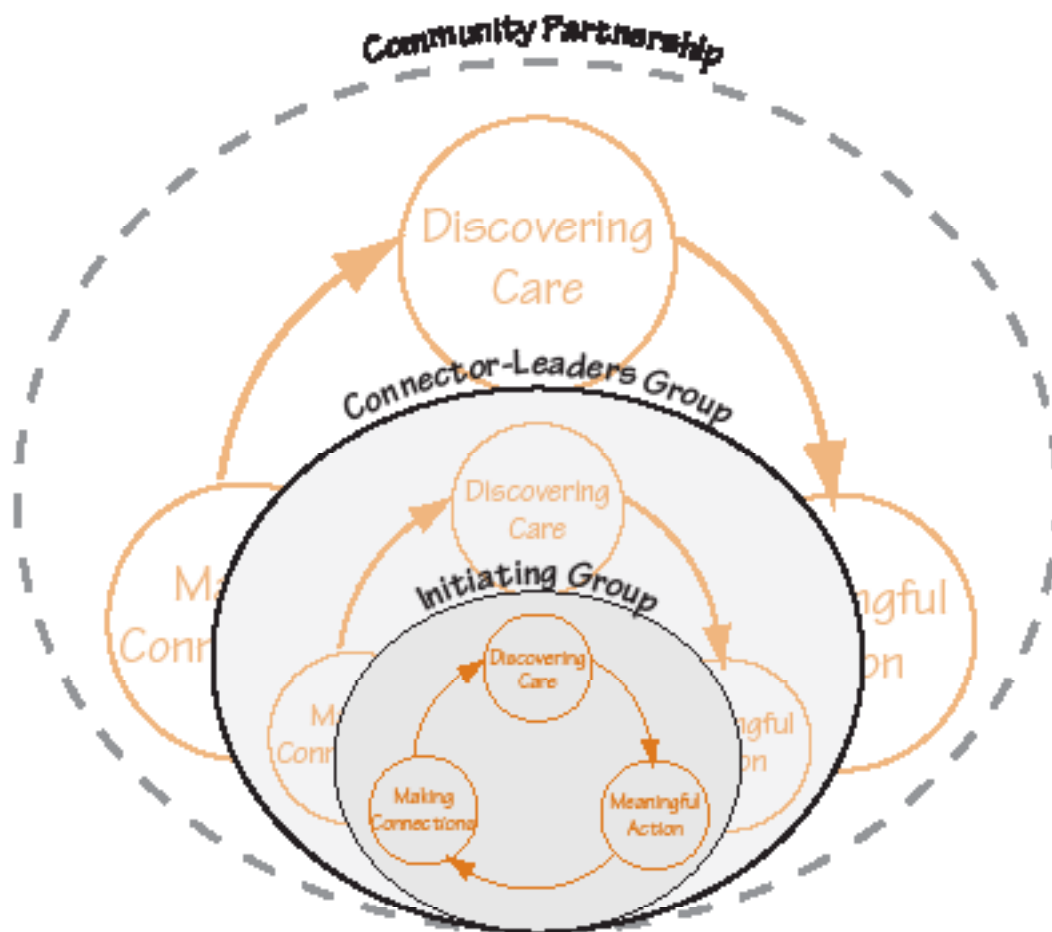


An ABCD connector-leaders group includes people with connections who are residents, local association or congregation leaders, or local business leaders. This group is made up of people who live, associate, or worship in the community. It functions with assistance from supporters from government, business, and human services who lead by stepping back. The connector-leaders group follows the principle: “Never to do anything that nobody wants”, and sets its agenda by listening to what citizens care enough to act on. The goal is not service delivery but activating the productive capacity of the local community. The leaders of an ABCD community partnership act from the heartfelt conviction that everyone has gifts that the community needs in order to be strong.

Steps to organize an ABCD Community Partnership

There are typically six steps in forming a strong ABCD community partnership group. Through these steps, the cycle of organizing activities –making connections, discovering care, meaningful action– ripples out from an initiating group to a connector-leader’s group and on to an ABCD community partnership group. Each cycle engages a wider and wider circle of citizens and associations in strengthening their community. These steps are...

1. Initiating group begins work
2. Hire and develop an ABCD community organizer
3. Start learning conversations to build connector-leaders group
4. Discover a good issue through learning conversations
5. Develop a community partnership of well connected people to act on the issue
6. Find and mobilize assets to address issues



The Initiating Group

This group includes individuals and representatives of institutions, associations, and congregations who want to invest in and support the formation of a citizen centered community partnership. The initiating group may provide funding, be a fiscal agent, build support, and clear away barriers to the forming of the connector-leaders organizing group. This getting started group may continue after the community partnership is formed as an allies group of well connected people who can open doors and enroll new partners for the ABCD organizing group. The initiating group hires the community organizer and directs the organizer until the leaders group of the community partnership forms to take over this role.

Exercise

The Initiating Group

Discuss these three questions in a small group:

1. What could you see this group doing in your community?
2. What kind of local people and groups could be valuable as members of this group?
3. Who do you know that is the kind of person needed for a “getting started” group?

Reflection Use this space to record what you have learned from discussing the Initiating Group. What is most important to remember about the forming and functioning of this group?

Hire and develop an ABCD community organizer

The gifts of the ABCD organizer.

Community organizers are the paid staff of a community partnership. The organizer assists in forming a leaders group of well-connected people and then helps this group bring community members into relationship for action. They work to get citizens to step up “on the chair” to take effective action. Good organizers are both good listeners and good persuaders. They can listen to discover what citizens care enough act on, and then get people to recognize that they themselves can act effectively to address what matters to them. Organizers are both encouraging and challenging, helping citizens grow in confidence and competence. Good organizers believe in their community. They enjoy teaching and are willing to build relationships in which they can be influential without a position of formal authority over those they organize. They like the challenge of being self-disciplined and self-directing.

Community organizers are about getting other people to do it.

—John McKnight

Organizers assist in forming a group of leaders who then take charge of the organizers, including their hiring and firing.

ABCD organizers focus on engaging the gifts of every community member. They challenge and encourage the leadership group to keep reaching out to bring in the assets and energies of people who are often left out.

The test of an organizer is the empowerment of a wider and wider partnership of citizens and associations. Leadership, connection, participation, and results grow as people continue to act from care and relationship. In contrast, activists or advocates measure themselves in terms of what they themselves have done for the people and causes they represent.

The organizer’s bottom line is the number of citizens and associations who say, “Yes” to participation, and “Yes” to action. This means being assertive in seeking people out and asking for their participation in action. It also means being willing to hear “no” and go forward anyway. A good organizer is like my father, a great salesman who always believed the customer was around the next

corner. Once he sold a building in a market where experts discouraged him from looking for buyers. My father said, "I don't care about all those people who don't want to buy it. I just need to find that one person who will buy it!" And he did. Good organizers have that kind of determination and relish the struggle with difficult situations.

Good organizers come from many walks of life. There is much they need to learn but no particular curriculum that prepares them. They share a genuine liking for and belief in people, a taste for the rough and tumble of community life, and a passion for mobilizing citizens to take meaningful action. They work hard to develop their organizing gifts.

Qualities To Look For In An ABCD Community Organizer

- Relationship builder, connector
- Good salesperson
- Not the leader but good at getting other people to act
- Teacher
- Critical thinker
- Seeks potential & relentlessly sees "glass half full"
- Tough-minded and disciplined
- Can be challenging AND supporting

Exercise

Gifts of a Good ABCD Organizer?

Discuss these questions in a small group.

1. Who do you know who is good at getting other people to act?
2. What is he or she like?
3. What do you think will help support and develop an organizer like the person you know who can activate others?

Reflection Use this space to summarize what you have learned from this discussion. What will you look for in an organizer? How will you support people to develop their gifts for organizing?

Paid organizers and unpaid citizen leaders.

Almost every effective community partnership has a paid organizer. Citizen leaders are simply too busy with life demands to dedicate themselves to meaningful action without some staff support. Considering how busy effective people are today the maxim that “organizers can work themselves out of a job” has become little more than a myth. Citizen leaders –people who have a following among other citizens who trust them– contribute their wisdom about their community to indicate where meaningful action will make the most difference, their connections and credibility to involve others, and their energy to move care into action. Organizers follow the direction indicated by these leaders and dedicate their paid time to assembling and servicing the organization that provides a vehicle for asset based community development.

Sometimes institutions want to pay citizens to act like citizens. They offer money to those who come to community planning. This is always a mistake. It confuses the exchange of money with the exchange of care that is the citizens gift. It is encouraging to support participation with a wonderful meal, free childcare, or transportation. It is demeaning to pay someone for acting as a citizen.

Learning to be an organizer.

Organizing is an art that integrates many practices. It is not a set of simple techniques that can be learned in a classroom or from a book (even this one). Organizers learn through practice and reflection on practice. Consultation and training with people who are more experienced guides the cycle of action and reflection that develops the knowledge and skills that allow organizers the full and effective use of their gifts. A community partnership's budget needs more than just an item for the organizer's salary, It also needs an allocation for consultation to the organizer and for the organizer's participation in learning experiences.

A **learning circle** of people who commit themselves to meet regularly with an organizer, listen carefully to the organizer's account of his or her work, and support the organizer in learning through reflection. This is a powerful resource to complement and give grounding to what an organizer learns from consultation and training. The questions that guide a learning circle are straightforward:

1. What is working?
2. What are the highest possibilities in the situation right now?
3. What will it take to mobilize action toward those highest possibilities?
4. What are the most important lessons in what is happening now?

The highest purpose of evaluation is learning not monitoring and the most effective form of assessment is guided self assessment. The five standards on the following page offer a structure that helps an organizer avoid distractions and the trap of working very hard but achieving little.

Quality Standards For Organizers

Doing Learning Conversations. How many learning conversations did you do this week? If as a full time organizer you do not do 15-20 learning conversations per week (30-60 minutes each), then you are not primarily organizing but doing something else. What you are doing might be good, but it will not organize your community. Organizing requires relationship building through learning conversations. These opportunities to listen are the way you prepare the ground in your community for participation, organization, and meaningful action.

Leaders and Members Growing Participation. At the beginning of a local initiative, the organizer's goal is to develop the connector-leader group at the center of the community partnership. Is this group growing week by week? What evidence do you have that the connector-leader group is having productive meetings? Later the focus shifts to expanding the membership of people actively participating and contributing to the community through the community partnership's work. Does the diversity of the people active through the community partnership reflect the diversity of the whole community? What evidence do you have that the group is growing in its ability to help people experience diversity as a source of strength, not a problem or a matter for awkwardness. Can the community partnership honestly say that it is weaving a tapestry of many different threads?

Inviting the Contribution of Marginalized People. Are a growing number of people who might ordinarily not be seen as having gifts actively included in your work as contributors? Are you involving young people? The elderly? People with disabilities? People on welfare? Is the conviction growing among your group and in the community that everyone has something to offer?

Setting a Citizen-Centered Agenda. Is the action agenda of the community partnership coming from the connector-leaders group rather than from the management of government, human service, or granting agencies? Is the action agenda arising from listening in the community through many conversations and meetings? Is there evidence of a constituency for action on the issues chosen? Is your community partnership doing what people in the community want to do rather than doing what someone else thinks they need to do?

Getting Results. Are you accomplishing anything or just talking or just caught up in activity? What evidence do you have that the community partnership is growing increasingly effective at reaching out to new members, planning, setting goals, doing research, finding assets, making connections, and producing results on issues? Are you making new partners? Is the community partnership successful on issues? How would you, as the organizer, describe your contribution to the community partnership's effectiveness?

Build through learning conversations

Learning conversations are the fundamental act of community organizing. Full time organizers usually do 15-20 such conversations per week. Connector-leaders also practice this form of intentional listening and connecting. Bringing people into meaningful conversations begins movement across the threshold from passivity to citizenship. First among the connector-leaders who are at the center of the community partnership, then among widening circles of diverse citizens, people seek to discover what they care about enough to act. Reflecting on the results of many learning conversations forms a picture of what citizens find compelling and what assets are available to the community. This shared sense of concerns and assets allows the connector-leaders group to frame an issue that will mobilize the community.

Learning conversation goals

A learning conversation is an opportunity to build a relationship by seeking to discover motivation to act: the care that generates connection and action. Each citizen has personal motivations to act and each citizen association or congregation has shared motivations to act. What an association cares about at a particular moment may or may not be captured in its official mission statement –in many associations, formal statements may not have caught up with members’ developing concerns and purposes. The listener works first to understand what the person or association cares about enough to act. Then the listener asks him or herself...

- How does this person’s or association’s motivation to act weave them into the tapestry of our community partnership?
- What assets could they bring?
- Who else shares or compliments what they care about enough to act?

LEARNING CONVERSATION GOALS

- Develop a stronger relationship
- Discover motivation to act
- Explore mutual interest & clarify possible action steps
- Find more prospects

Elements of a learning conversation

Opportunities for good learning conversations grow like strawberry vines. The first conversations among members of the connector-leader's group builds an initial list of prospects that grows as those who converse identify others who care about some aspect of the group's organizing interest. A good prospect for early learning conversations will be a leader (someone who has a following) in an association (which already gathers and supports capacity to act) who demonstrates motivation to act and has a potential interest in common with the ABCD community partnership.

Good manners make for good learning conversations. Meet people at times and in places that are comfortable and convenient, Be on time and take no more than the 30-60 minutes the person agreed to. Treat people respectfully and listen carefully.

Conduct the conversation singly or in a pair of inquirers. After several learning conversations, gather with other interviewers to share, summarize, reflect on what you are learning, and revise the process if necessary.

Effective learning conversations begin with clear answers to two important questions:

1. Who are we? A good answer to this question establishes your credentials as a representative of a group worth taking seriously. It avoids the person who asks for the learning conversation being perceived as "somebody nobody sent."

"We're from ABCD Organizing, a group of eleven neighborhood associations who are working together to develop good jobs for youth in our community. Your pastor, Rev Smith suggested that we meet with you."

2. Why are we meeting with you? This is a simple direct statement of the interest that brings your group together. The connector-leaders group works out the core of this statement and everyone who has a learning conversation on behalf of the group starts with the same statement of purpose. This sends a message throughout the community that this group is organizing around this issue. The purpose statement raises a question of concern to the community and leaves the person room to express her or his concerns and ideas. It does not try to sell an answer.

“We are working together to create good jobs for young people in our community. We want to hear your thoughts on the issue and see what you think of the ideas we’ve had so far.”

After answering these two questions, the learning conversation proceeds.

3. Introduction. This allows a warm-up so that those in the conversation can acknowledge the relationship they have or recognize common interests or connections.

4. Identify motivation to act. This question –what do you care about enough to act– is the heart of the learning conversation, It invites the person to talk about motivation to act. Discover as much as possible about the person’s concerns, dreams, and gifts. A good conversation lets the person talk about overall motivation to act as well as the specific concerns, dreams and gifts that link the person to the community partnerships’ purpose. It may help to have a test question such as, *“Would you want to introduce a young person to your work?”*

5. Invite next steps. This question –what do you want to do?– offers the person a connection to the ABCD community partnership. Some people will be ready to take action based on the learning conversation. It’s important to offer a next step that they can take to become more involved. It may be a meeting of people who share an interest in some aspect of the issue, for example, the people who care about how congregations can help create youth jobs. It may be an invitation to join in publicity or research activities.

6. Seek others. Who else should we invite for learning conversations. This question –who else do you know that might work with us?– continues to grow the network.

After talking to a few people, connector-leaders gather to assess how the conversations are going, talk about any problems, revise the questions based on responses, and discuss what’s been found –both people to involve and issues people think are important for action.

1-1 Learning Conversation Notes (Example)

Name

Date

Address

Phone

e-mail

Fax

Occupation

Who suggested the contact?

1. Gifts, capacities, & skills to contribute?

2. Issues and concerns you want to work on?

3. What about (issue of concern to the ABCD community partnership)? Concerns? What should we do that you would work on?

4. Strong relationships with others (associations and institutions)

5. Possible roles in ABCD community partnership?

6. Further contacts for us to see (name and phone)?

Discover a good organizing issue through learning conversations

The connector-leaders group extends and develops the community partnership by mobilizing people and associations around specific issues that citizens care about enough to act. Learning conversations reveal dreams and visions for the community's future as well as problems and concerns. The connector-leader group considers what citizens have said in learning conversations and frames an issue that has these qualities:

1. The issue is **concrete**. People will know when they have succeeded.
2. The issue is **winnable**. There is a reasonable chance of success.
3. The issue is **immediate**. Learning conversations show that there are a number of people who will act on this issue. A meeting that brings together people who have expressed a willingness to act and asks for their commitment to a definite course of action tests the strength of the constituency. Beginning with an issue that is easiest to win usually builds momentum.
4. Action on this issue will **build the community partnership**. Working together will both strengthen the connections among people and bring in new people and associations.
5. Action on this issue has **two tracks**. Working on this issue will mobilize assets within the community and engage assets outside the community.

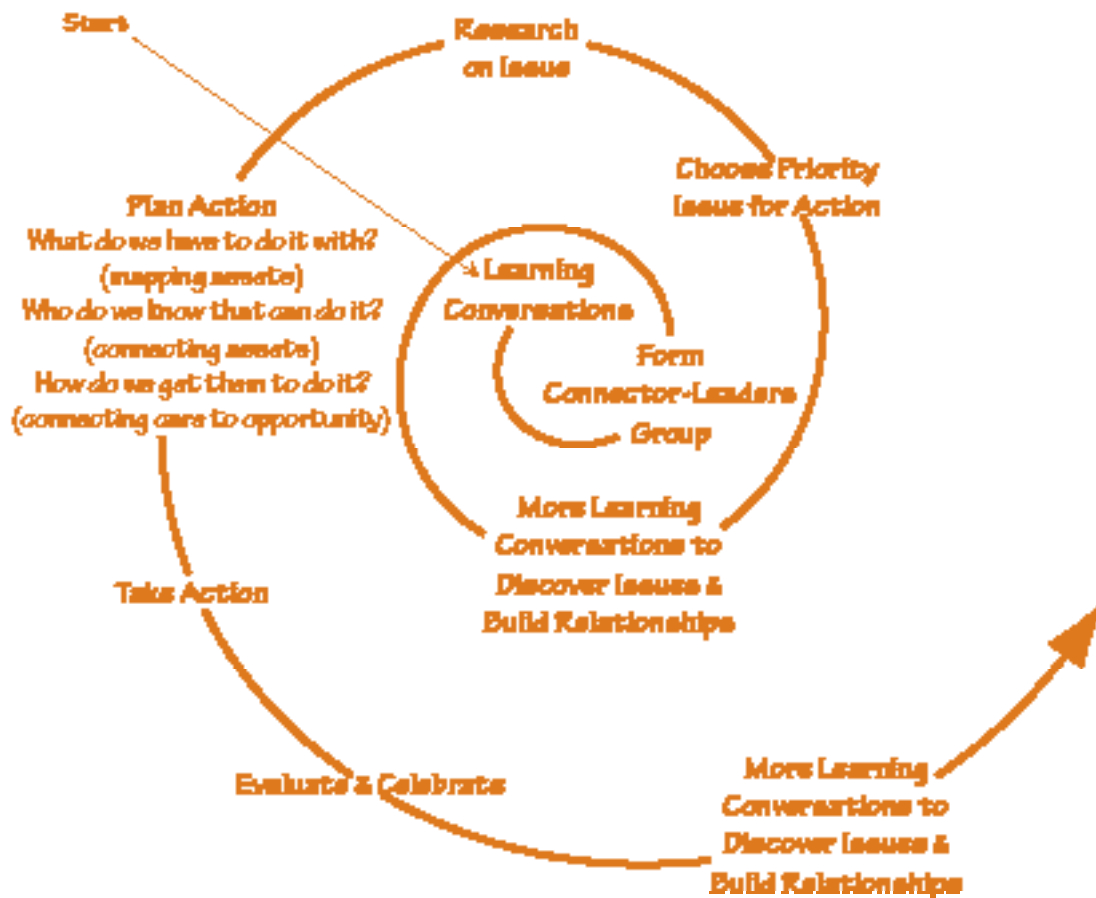
Organize a community partnership to act on the issue

The connector-leaders group embodies the truth that power is in relationships. This group of 5-15 people who are well connected, have a following in diverse sectors of community life, and have discovered common ground for action, use their relationships to mobilize the community to address a critical, winnable issue. They begin by asking themselves these questions in order to create a list of prospects.

1. Which sectors of our community do we want to involve (for example, business, religious congregations, parents, or specific neighborhoods)?
2. Whom do we know in the sectors of the community we want to involve?

3. Who should make the invitation? Who is best connected to the person or association we want to enroll?
4. What motivation to act could this person or association have?
5. How is our work an opportunity for this person or association to act on what they care about?
6. Whom do we need to get to know that we don't know now?
7. Who do we know that knows the people that we need to get to know?

Once a good issue is identified and the connector-leaders group has begun to reach out and engage people and associations, the community partnership does action research to get a clear picture of the present situation and possible solutions, maps and mobilizes assets to get results, evaluates and celebrates, and then moves on to build even greater citizen power and leadership.



ABCD Reflections from a Dedicated Triangle Shape Shifter

Dan Duncan

As a human services professional and social worker, I have always asked the question; as a professional what is the best work I can do to help improve the lives of children, families and seniors?

To answer this question I have developed four principles to help guide my work

- People should always be treated as resources not just recipients or objects of service
- Everyone has gifts
- All truly effective strategies must include a place-based, neighborhood development component
- All good work starts by asking people to share their gifts not by asking them what services they want

Since my early childhood, I have always looked for ways to improve things; the status quo was, and is, never good enough. In addition, coming of age in the 60s with the Viet Nam war, Kent State, and Watergate, I learned the institutional world is not always right.

During my junior year of college, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in a new program, University Year for Action, a VISTA program for college students. I spent my junior year of college in the inner city of Omaha working with kids as a teacher and with welfare mothers as a National Welfare Rights (NWR) organizer. Through this experience I began to see the power of neighborhood and citizen centered organizing in the lives of the children and families and the amazing gifts of the mothers other's labeled as "lazy welfare queens". In my senior year, I experienced the life of an Alinsky organizer in the public housing projects in south Omaha. There I helped the residents share their gifts to work together to develop a childcare co-op as well as other self-help activities.

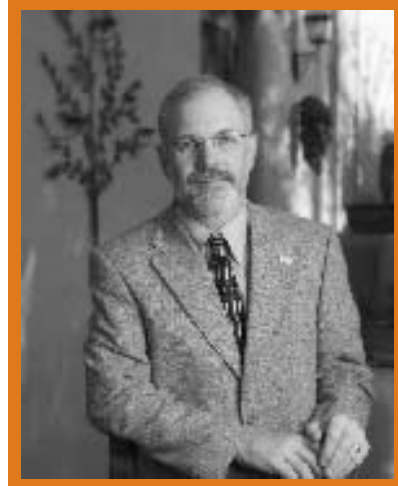
While I experienced the power of citizens and neighborhoods and the negative impact of institutions and professionals, I elected to take the path of becoming a social worker to work from within to change the system. I started social work graduate school with a healthy sense of skepticism as to the promise of services and throughout my graduate education challenged many of the professors and what they were teaching. As part of my commitment to institutional change I created my own nontraditional field placement, with another questioning student, as interns

with the Tucson City Manager's office of inter-governmental affairs. At the city we worked as lobbyists for the city and helped develop a plan for intercity neighborhood development.

It should be noted that in 1996 I returned to the School of Social Work as an adjunct professor where I have taught social policy and community and organizational change from an ABCD perspective. Doing my part to respond to my earlier skepticism for a new generation of students.

Upon receiving my Masters of Social Work, I helped launch and served as the first director of a centralized food bank. The primary reason we started the food bank was not to hand out food, but to improve the human services delivery system that saw food as an end rather than a means to greater self-sufficiency. From there I moved on to serve as the director of another local nonprofit, before beginning my United Way career. The primary reason I was interested in becoming a United Way professional was to help change the system. I felt working at a major social planning and funding agency would give me the best platform to help the system move from treating individuals as clients and objects of service to resources.

As a United Way professional one of the strategies, I am most proud of, has been to help three United Way's broaden our work from just giving grants to local nonprofits and counting "clients" served to providing small grants to formal or informal neighborhood associations or in many instances grants to small groups of residents to help them implement a good idea for their neighborhood. Here at the United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona the vehicle for our neighborhood grant process is PRO Neighborhoods. PRO is not just another nonprofit, it is a partnership between the City of Tucson, Pima County, the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona and the United Way. PRO was founded about twelve years ago, on the principles of ABCD, following a visit to Tucson by John McKnight. Since its birth, PRO has provided over \$500,000 in small grants (\$5,000 or less), and thousands of hours of technical assistance and training to help neighborhoods unlock the gifts of their residents. As I think of PRO and its small grants, I view the grants as a giant magnet hovering over the neighborhoods of our city. The magnet attracts potential neighborhood leaders who have a good idea to work with some of their neighbors to make the idea a reality. It really is not about the money to fund a project; it is about using the money to unlock the power of the neighborhood and its residents. Again, the key to



PRO Neighborhoods is that it provides the major institutions in our community an opportunity to support citizen centered organizing and not just fund services.

About 12 years ago, I had for a professional dedicated to this work the greatest honor, the opportunity to join the ABCD Institute as an adjunct faculty member. As a faculty member, I have had the privilege to work with John McKnight, Jody Kretzmann, Mike Green and Henry Moore, and all of the other faculty members. Some of the most amazing observers, thinkers, and pioneers working today to improve the human condition, by focusing on what we already have, not what we don't. They have all helped guide my work as a human service professional (a triangle) to always ask the right question: What is the right tool for the job; citizens and neighborhoods caring or professionals and agencies delivering services.

Over my 30 plus years as a human services professional I have tried to never forget the lessons we learn and the results we can achieve when we focus on what people can do, not what they can't do, the power of neighborhoods as the backbone of effective work, and the power of asking people to get involved and share their gifts.



www.proneighborhoods.org

Miss Mary's Walkers

Miss Mary died April 2, 2006 at the age of 98. For thirty-three years, since her retirement, she got up every morning at 5:30 AM and started walking at 6:00 AM. She walked around the Baldwin Park neighborhood for about an hour with four women and one man.



What do you think they were doing while they were walking for that hour? They were talking. They talked about everybody and everything. They also picked up paper. (But Miss Ann, one of the walkers, said, "I pick up paper but I don't do napkins or Kleenex!") Sigmund picked up aluminum cans and put them in a plastic bag and gave them to a guy who supplemented his income selling recycled cans. The walkers also picked up people's newspapers off the sidewalk or the lawn and threw them onto their porches. For this hour everyday that it didn't rain, they studied the neighborhood in every way you can imagine.

Frequently, they'd solve a community problem. For example, when they discovered that some children had knocked out the streetlights in Baldwin Circle. Mary nagged until some of the walkers talked to the children's parents and got restitution.

The walkers tried to figure out what they could do about problems they observed on their daily walks. If they couldn't solve a problem themselves, they identified which local authority they could call to resolve the issue.

What kind of community development group is this? They have no registered name, no tax-exemption, no bank account, no officers or board of directors, no annual general meeting, no membership dues or cards. They are anonymous, but they create benefits: the walkers take steps that help the community stay healthy. They keep the news moving around the neighborhood. They clean-up and recycle as they walk. They identify problems, take action and urge others to take action on neighborhood problems.

As we think about community-building, it seems important that we remember these invisible groups. We should figure out how to lift up their everyday community work, and give them a meaningful role in making the community a better place to live.

– Henry Moore