The PICO Pattern of Relationship

Within the PICO network, we have placed the organizing principle "Power rests in the relationship" at the center of our organizing model. This principle is what distinguishes us from many other types of organizing and is a critical tool in how we develop leaders. Because the word "relationship" is used by many professions, it is important that we spend time reflecting upon and learning about the distinctive relational pattern suggested by the PICO model of organizing.

What do we not mean by the word "relationship?" Certainly, a common understanding of relationship has to do with our personal life; friends, spouses and families. Within PICO, however, our stress is building public relationships, based on common self-interest, trust, and values. When we ask a leader to do 1-1's, we are not asking them to expand their circle of friendships. We ask them to build public relationships with people they may or may not seek out as friends. Similarly, we are not looking for the kind of relationships developed by counselors, social workers or therapists. The goal of our relationships is to develop leaders for public life, not to help fix someone's personal problems. This is not to say that we do not develop friendships with some leaders or that organizing can be transformative to someone's understanding of him/herself, or even therapeutic. But organizers are first neither friends or counselors.

I want to suggest that in organizing we employ not one kind of relationship, but a pattern of relationship which has different modes. This pattern of relationship is agitational, challenging, reflective and visionary. In the following, I will attempt to describe what each of these qualities means.

Agitational

In our 1-1's and training pieces, an organizer strives to agitate people's deepest set feelings and assumptions about themselves and their communities. Organizers ask questions which bring to the surface pain and anger. Like an agitator in a washing machine, these kinds of questions and observations serve to shake loose the embedded feelings and assumptions which often prevent a person from acting. For example, if an organizer brings to the surface a leader's anger, the leader now has the opportunity to channel that anger towards action, rather than allow it to sit under the surface, inhibiting him/her from acting. Agitating is also about probing people at a values level. We do not only bring to the surface anger, but also those very positive values that each of us is struggling to live out. We ask questions about what is most important, what matters in the long run, and what would it mean to live out our stated values more fully.

Challenging
Our relational pattern with leaders involves challenge, the action of confronting a leader's rationalizations for choosing powerlessness. Organizers hold up the contradictions between a person's stated values and his/her actions, or lack of them. Organizers give leaders direct feedback, holding up a mirror to them. Challenge involves risk; it creates tension between an organizer and a leader, and takes a relationship to a different level. We take these risks because we know that our goal is not to be liked by a leader, but to serve that leader's development. We also know that relationships are far more elastic and can handle more tension than we would like to think.

Vision

Our organizing builds vision and hope. It enables people to imagine a different reality, and to move out of a self-interest which grows bigger at the same time it is rooted in the nitty gritty context of a neighborhood, and a family. The development of vision in leaders happens over time. Most people initially enter into our efforts acting out of pain. However, as an organizer probes leaders at the value level, and as leaders experience more and more of their own power, the opportunity to develop vision emerges.

Reflective

Organizers help leaders reflect on their experience- for example, we help them look at a research meeting when a public official treats them like dirt, or tries to co-opt them. We help leaders reflect on the changes taking place within themselves as they begin to act with power in the public arena, and become heroes in their own homes. In our busy and fragmented lives, the need for reflection is critical if we are to change ourselves. In our relational pattern, this work of helping leaders reflect on experience is the most central. Agitating, challenging and creating vision are different modes of reflection, Ours is an action/reflection model of learning. We believe that people learn and change not by being taught something in a vacuum, but by doing it, and then reflecting upon it.

The Pattern of Relationship and Social Analysis

The modes of our relational pattern explored above are key to the development of leaders, but we also need to consider the critical question of leaders for what? What are the broader goals we are trying to accomplish? Are we developing neighborhood activists, education reformers, economic developers, ministers, or prophets? I would say that we are working on all of these. But we are also dedicated to transforming communities and such transformation does not occur willy-nilly. We must recognize that building relationships, and moving isolated actions on the most apparent conditions facing a community- blight, crime, and neighborhood deterioration- is insufficient. These activities, in and of themselves, will not lead to the kind of transformation we desire. To create more significant change, we need to develop a broader analysis. Without evolving a social analysis, we run the risk of promoting the assumption that relationship building, and actions on discrete neighborhood conditions, will lead to the transformation of a community.
A social analysis, to be relevant to an organizing effort, needs to emerge from the interplay between the concerns surfaced in 1-1’s, our research actions, our broader reading and research, and our understanding of the political environment we operate in. We believe relationships are transformative. But I am also suggesting that a key part of our relational pattern is thinking together with leaders about why things are, what keeps it that way, and what will it take to change it. We must be intentional in our 1-1 work and training to explore how concerns point to broader social, political and economic trends in a given community. We must do research with leaders on alternative models of education or economic development. We must seek out those inside and outside of our leadership base who can help us think at a deeper level about why things are. Without a dynamic interplay between issues and relationships, we run the risk of imposing the ideas of policy wonks on a community, or mobilizing people to a meeting about something which they have no ownership in.

Many leaders outgrow neighborhood activism. We have to be about something much deeper. We have to be willing to question consistently the depth at which we are exploring values, issues and relationships and push ourselves to take more risks. A broader social analysis of our community empowers us to have a broader vision.

My experience has been that whether or not an organizer is successful depends directly on whether or not she or he is able to master this pattern of relationship. Regardless of the qualities a person might bring to the job, if he/she does not learn the different modes of this pattern and is able to make a sound judgement on when to use them, he/she is not likely to develop leaders effectively.