



BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER BY BUILDING GRASSROOTS LEADERS SACRAMENTO VALLEY ORGANIZING COMMUNITY (SVOC)

“A group of people in a room that have no relationship with each other is a mob. A group of people in a room that have a relationship with each other is power.”
Larry Ferlazzo, Organizer, Sacramento Valley Organizing Community

“We are our brother's keeper, therefore we cannot afford to ignore the needs of those crying within our community, who are often passed by.”
Pastor Cornelius Taylor, Jr., Co-Chair, Sacramento Valley Organizing Community

"We Own Our Own Lawnmowers and They're Better Than Yours"

It was an important meeting. Having decided to embark on a project to build low-income housing, the Sacramento Valley Organizing Community (SVOC) leadership team wanted the mayor's help.

The meeting proved to be a short one, though. The SVOC team asked for the mayor's support, and he responded, “How do you people think that you can own your own homes when you don't even own your own lawn mowers?” Surprised and disappointed by the mayor's summary rejection of their request, the team nevertheless graciously thanked him for his time and departed.

Determined to garner upper level support for the project, the SVOC team regrouped and developed a strategy to bring the mayor into the fold. The key event in that campaign was an invitation to the mayor to "come to our people," as SVOC activists put it, a mass meeting to celebrate and boost the housing project proposal. The 2,000 people in attendance applauded the mayor as he made his way to the podium. But you could have

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heard a pin drop when SVOC leaders greeted the mayor with a reminder about his lawn mower crack. SVOC activists continued, “We want you to know that we do own our own lawn mowers, and they’re better than yours.” On cue a dozen SVOC supporters uncovered a small herd of lawnmowers in the back of the assembly hall and started them in unison. The rather stunned mayor apologized for his earlier remarks and committed his support for the project, in the process forging a lasting relationship with SVOC.

Demanding Respect

Such pointed tactics might seem risky to some, but SVOC’s primary goal has always been to embolden community members to take control of their own lives and futures by getting involved in public life. SVOC activists are taught to reach out to all potential allies—even those who are unlikely—to build important relationships, while being respectful, but also demanding respect in return.

“Regardless of position and regardless of the relationship you’re trying to build, you want that respect,” says SVOC Co-Chair, Pastor Cornelius Taylor, Jr., of Whole Life Fellowship in Elk Grove, California. “And that’s what we teach our leaders. People walk over you when you allow them to walk over you.”

Certainly the mayor heard SVOC loud and clear. The effects of the lawnmower meeting reverberated through city for months afterwards. The message, says one SVOC activist who was there, was “Don’t mess with SVOC. And, ‘Give them respect.’ SVOC was saying, ‘We as individuals will no longer accept your characterization of who we are.’”

Fulfilling the Promise

Founded in 1994, Sacramento Valley Organizing Community is a three-county, grass-roots organization with 40 member institutions in northern California. Organized through area churches, SVOC’s primary goal is to build public power through public action. The work bridges geographic, cultural, and faith boundaries, and includes activists from the Latino, Black, White, African, Slavic, and Southeast Asian communities. Currently, SVOC is in the midst of an effort to expand into ten additional counties with an even broader participant base that includes unions and non-religious community organizations and institutions.

Over the past nine years, SVOC has successfully tackled issues such as affordable housing, job training and placement, and immigration. The coalition has proved remarkably effective say those who’ve watched SVOC in action. The group has secured more than \$30 million to build 360 affordable single-family homes, while creating another 150 tenant-controlled units of affordable housing. SVOC led a nationally recognized citizenship campaign that resulted in thousands of immigrants being sworn in as U.S. citizens. SVOC also developed a “one-stop” welfare to work center, which focuses on placing people in living-wage jobs that pay \$9.50 an hour and higher.

For SVOC, however, such specific program achievements are considered secondary to its primary goal: to convince potential local activists that they have the power and influence to effect change in their own communities. "It would be wrong to say that [SVOC's] passion is housing or jobs," says one SVOC activist. "SVOC develops leadership in communities where there is no leadership, where people have been marginalized." It does that, says the activist, by going "door to door and talking to people about their beliefs and their desires and their dreams and then affirming them. SVOC is what so many people promise to be and are not."

Looking for "Cold Anger"

SVOC's primary work is to identify and develop new leaders who will fight on behalf of their communities. The issue work they do around immigration, affordable housing, and job training becomes the responsibility of those new leaders. The ultimate goal, says Larry Ferlazzo, is to "put [SVOC's current leaders] out of a job. We become advisers and continue to be mentors."

SVOC pursues a variety of strategies in identifying new community leaders, not least of which is engaging in countless one-on-one meetings. By going door-to-door, SVOC identifies emerging leaders and gauges their relative readiness for taking on projects. SVOC talks with the people they meet about their interests and passions. As SVOC identifies emerging leaders, those leaders are also encouraged to meet with other community members.

One of the qualities that SVOC looks for in a potential community leader is what the organization calls "cold anger." That is, anger that is strategic, rather than fiery and out of control. "Hot anger," says Ferlazzo, "isn't structured in a strategic and effective way." Hot anger, he says, is what you get on talk radio. "They feel like they're actually doing something when they're not accomplishing anything," Ferlazzo says. Also important, says SVOC organizers, is to find people who "have a following and can deliver it," which means finding people who are genuinely tuned into and connected with the communities that they represent.

SVOC continues to mentor up-and-coming community leaders, sending them to a week-long leadership training sponsored by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) that teaches them "to interact in a public arena so that people can be able to go out there and speak intelligently about an issue and know the pros and cons," says a SVOC-trained activist. Among other things, community leaders say that IAF trains people to step out of their "comfort zone," learn about their strengths and weaknesses as leaders, learn the differences between personal and public relationships, and run large meetings with key decision-makers.

Never Do for Others What They Can Do for Themselves

Perhaps most important, SVOC insists that community leaders learn and adhere to the "Iron Rule": Never do for others what they can do for themselves. This is an established

rule that is consciously and consistently reinforced throughout leadership training and mentoring. The rule is consistent with the organization's leadership model that focuses on grassroots activists taking responsibility for their own issues and agenda.

Although community members might feel some initial trepidation at stepping out to take on that kind of responsibility, they are still expected to step up and follow SVOC's disciplined approach to the work: first, talk to people to see what they want; second, understand the political landscape (for example, the number of votes necessary to swing an election or which key policy makers they need to win over in order to implement some program or project). They are also expected to know the local legal landscape, such as local zoning regulations and minimum wage laws.

It's a stand-up-for-yourself attitude that SVOC Co-chair Carmen Mirazo says she learned the hard way. After going to Larry Ferlazzo with an idea to build housing, says Mirazo, Ferlazzo told her, "You do it". Mirazo's response, "I don't know how to do that." At that point Ferlazzo invoked the Iron Rule, "You could learn, you know. I'm not going to do it for you. You have to do it if you really want to." Says Mirazo: "He really stuck to the Iron Rule. I was out there taking pictures, bringing in experts, and learning." Recounts another SVOC community leader, "SVOC will provide the support, the training and everything, but you as leaders, you have to go out there and talk to that government official."

First Do Your Homework

The corollary to the Iron Rule, say SVOC activists, is that any group seeking SVOC backing for a project has to have done a significant amount of groundwork in advance of making their proposal. SVOC is never shy about sending people back to the drawing board. For example, a regional group of community leaders from Fairfield, SC wanted to do an affordable housing project. When they met with the SVOC leaders to gain their backing and support, however, it was clear the community activists had not done their homework. According to several SVOC activists, "They were not ready because they had not adopted the [principle] that this begins with relationships. You have to first talk to people. You have to know who is going to move into these homes. You need to know who is going to go the city council. You need to know that you actually have a group of buyers. What was clear was that they had this vision, but the vision didn't include the organizing piece. They didn't know who would buy the houses, and they hadn't surveyed the land." Rather than back what was clearly still a fledgling effort, SVOC asked the group to go back and do more work on the project, including building the sort of relationships necessary for the successful execution of such a plan.

"Power" Versus a "Mob"

There is an old adage, says Ferlazzo: "A group of people in a room that have no relationship with each other is a mob. A group of people in a room that have a relationship with each other is power." Relationships are central to every aspect of SVOC's work. SVOC builds relationships the old-fashioned way: establish a foundation

of support in the community and among leaders in the community and then build up. "The whole focus of our organizing is building relationships," says Ferlazzo, "to approach things relationally as opposed to [diving into] a task, because the relationships will be the glue. It's the relationship that will maintain the unity within the organization, not the [project]." As with their leadership building efforts, SVOC believes you can only build such relationships one-on-one.

Key to such meetings, say SVOC activists, is identifying everyone's self interest, which serves as the basis for the relationship. "It's the one-to-one's when you find out where the person is coming from, what their needs are, what you have in common," says Mirazo. "And then they go ahead and do other one-to-one's with other people who have the same interest." That way, says Mirazo, you can start building a critical mass of ground-level support for action.

For example, an effort to help immigrants secure driver's licenses gelled into a more substantial push after a Mexican community leader shared her frustrations in trying to obtain a license with an African community leader. The African community leader began to wonder whether such an issue might not be affecting those in her community, as well. So she began arranging one-on-one house meetings with her African community members and learned that, indeed, there were complications around getting a driver's license.

Having identified a problem and a constituency, she invited SVOC leaders and an expert on immigration to attend community meetings. She says, "We just had conversations. People just told the stories. And that's how it started. And we had Latino sisters there, too. And they began to share their stories and we began to share and see a commonality, that we have these issues together." Together, the two groups have been working on supporting policies that would make it easier for immigrants to secure driver's licenses.

Frank Talk About Differences

SVOC leaders also recognize that to expand their multi-racial organization they, themselves a racially and ethnically diverse team, need to engage in honest, frank conversations about race, ethnicity, and difference. In fact, the SVOC leadership team laid the foundation for relationship building among diverse constituencies by first developing those relationships among themselves.

"It was not love at first sight," says Reverend Tyrone Hicks, who is African American. "As a matter of fact, I tossed [other team members] out of my office a couple of times... We still battle, even to this day, after over eight years we still battle. But we have the mutual respect for each other and we're not hurtful to each other."

No Permanent Enemies, No Permanent Friends

SVOC also believes that relationships are fluid and continuously change; there are no permanent allies and no permanent enemies. Above all, says Ferlazzo, "You don't burn

bridges.” For example, a city councilman had tried to derail the development of a housing project that SVOC ultimately accomplished. In spite of his efforts to block the project, SVOC asked him to deliver some minor permits for the housing project in terms of helping extract them from the bureaucracy. Given the councilman's help - despite his initial opposition - SVOC invited him to attend the groundbreaking for the housing project and recognized him for his efforts. What could have been a potentially polarized relationship was smoothed over, says Ferlazzo, which was particularly important because the councilman had plans to run for mayor.

Agitating for Opportunities

As SVOC builds—or in some cases, creatively salvages—relationships, they are both constantly beating the bushes for new opportunities to fire up community action while being ready to jump on opportunities for action that might arise along the way. "There's an old Chinese proverb that says 'You've got to stand still with your mouth open a long time before a roast duck will fly into it,'" says Ferlazzo. And so SVOC regularly pushes community activists to find a cause around which to coalesce. But there are also those times when a roast duck flies along that are just too tempting to pass up, and SVOC is ready for those, as well.

SVOC seized such an opportunity in the wake of an election that saw a Democrat defeat an extremely conservative Republican in a congressional race. The Republican Secretary of State tried to overturn the election by alleging rampant voting by undocumented immigrants. Election officials even went so far as to investigate every voter in the contest who had a Spanish surname.

A group of African-American activists working with SVOC came up with a plan worthy of the lawnmower caper. They decided to give the Secretary of State the “Bull Connor” award for doing more than anyone since Bull Connor in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 to discourage voter participation by minorities. "We had like two or three hundred people led by a group of African-American clergymen to give this award," says Ferlazzo.

More than Just Projects

In the end, SVOC activists say success is as much about teaching communities and community activists that they have control over their own destinies, as it is about successful campaigns on voting rights or a groundbreaking for a housing project.

In fact, Ferlazzo recalls one ground breaking in particular that captures the SVOC spirit. In addressing an assembled crowd, one of the community members who had worked hard to complete the project noted, "You know this is a great day. I've got a house. Many of the people I know got a house. It's a great victory. But that's not the real victory today. The real victory is that I'm up in front speaking to you; that I can be across the table with the mayor and congressperson to negotiate; and, even more important, that my children see me doing these things."

Those words, coming from a community leader, represent SVOC's real work to build a public power base in disenfranchised communities by equipping people with the tools and mindsets to be full participants in public life, say activists and supporters. Reverend Hicks says that a win is, "Getting people who are not the ones who normally talk to bureaucrats to step up to the plate and become leaders. That's always a win, when you see the leadership of others that you mentor and that you train and then they become leaders."

Building Community Power by Building Grassroots Leaders: Leadership Story

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