

Grassroots

Change is difficult. None of us like change. Organizations, government, society, churches, even one's neighborhood does not take kindly to change. And yet, change is necessary. The question becomes, if no one wants change but change is necessary, how can change be effected?

Change has to begin at some point on the top-down or bottom-up scale. Most change is created from the top down. Those with regulatory authority, e.g., elected officials, judges, police chiefs, etc., impose change through legislation, legal rulings, code enforcement, and the like. Change is imposed, and while it may ultimately be appealable through future elections or higher courts, such appeals are costly, time-consuming, and tightly controlled by legal and government processes. For others, like myself – and most other people, I think – who possess no regulatory standing, we have no choice but to rely on leverage created and generated by grassroots organizing. In other words, change that is generated from the bottom up.

Creating change through grassroots organizing is a daunting challenge, and most would-be organizers soon fall victim to discouragement. Walking uphill against the mountain of status quo, disinterest, and apathy soon leads to emotional exhaustion and personal discouragement. The organizer is confronted with the reality that no one cares about creating this change except the organizer, but because the organizer is only one person, what change can possibly be accomplished? If this one person possesses no authority, no standing, no police powers, how can he/she be a majority of one?

The saving grace for the experienced grassroots organizer is the fact that change can be generated by a very small number of like-minded people. There is no need to convince or corral a majority of people, only a handful. The challenge is to find these committed, like-minded people. Where are they? How does the would-be organizer contact them? What can they do?

There is no one formula to the exclusion of all others, but whichever strategy is used, you can be sure that it will require a long-term personal effort, a sustainable level of commitment, a willingness to put one's own self-image up for public scrutiny and ridicule, a dogged determination to succeed, and a high

tolerance for the risk of personal defeat. Do not be deceived, it is hard work, thankless work, and very time-consuming.

Creating change through grassroots organizing begins with one person – you. If you are unable or unwilling to motivate yourself, you will be unable to motivate another person. The fact that you show yourself to be so committed, so confident, and so determined empowers other individuals to believe in you, join your cause, and accept the challenge to create change. However, it is very unlikely that any other person who joins with you will ever be as motivated to create the change you espouse. It falls to the leader of the grassroots effort to bind people together by the sheer force of his/her unshakable belief in the cause at hand.

Where to begin? Assuming the grassroots organizer can explain what the issue is and articulate why it is important for the change to be made, there is no other place to start than with the people. The organizer must reach out to people – individuals and small groups – to make the case for change, and ask for volunteer assistance. Reaching out, explaining, and asking for help are the keys to recruiting a handful of people to create change.

Rescue Land Park is a case study in grassroots organizing. The issue was the city's allowance of an 85-year-old city park for use as a 1,000-car college parking lot for Sacramento City College students. On its face, such a use would seem ludicrous, but the result was inescapable: two-thirds of a 250-acre park traditionally devoted to urban forest, open space, and recreational use was given over to a high-impact urban use – a parking lot. This change of use was permitted without the benefit of a public hearing or the vote of elected city government officials; all was accomplished with a wink and nod between city officials and the community college district administrators.

Reaching out to people meant going door-to-door throughout the neighborhoods surrounding the park to tie a Rescue Land Park informational leaflet to front doors. For the first two weeks, I was the only person distributing the flyers; in the third week I picked up my first volunteer, and by the fourth week I had picked up three more. For three months, two hours each morning, this small band of volunteers walked door-to-door tying leaflets to front doors – a total of 7,000 homes. (One of the volunteers quizzed me about tying the leaflets instead of leaving them on the front stoop,

which, she said, would make our work go faster. Yes, faster, I agreed, but tying the informational flyer to the front door is a communication; leaving it on the stoop is litter.)

Even a seasoned veteran like myself was discouraged by this first Rescue Land Park salvo. The response to our request for help was minimal at best. Most residents didn't know about the college parking in the park and didn't much care when they found out about it. A few people were hostile because our campaign, they said, threatened the college education of poor students who parked in the park because they could not afford to park on campus. In the end, the grassroots campaign attracted only 30 people who were willing to participate. (If you count silent spouses, the Rescue Land Park rolls would number 60, I rationalized.) Hard work, money for leaflets out of my own pocket, but I found my grassroots handful of people.

I spare you the stories of frustrations, small victories, setbacks, the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the shouting on all sides that transpired during the course of the grassroots campaign. But after two years of holding on, speaking out, and agitating city government, the city council voted unanimously to restrict college student parking through the use of two-hour time zones.

Worth it? It depends on how much you believe in the issue, how many years you are willing to give to it, how tolerant you are about participating in public controversy, and how persistently confident you can be in the face of discouragement, indifference, and inertia.

Not every grassroots campaign is successful, far from it. Luck, timing, the morality of the issue, fundraising, and the quality of the organizing all play a role in the outcome. The point is, a successful grassroots campaign will cause the change you believe is necessary. You do not have to be part of the power elite to create change, but you must be able to set aside your fear of failure and of putting yourself on public display.

Fear not, it can be learned. It takes practice.

