

Power-Based vs. Relationship-Based Social Change by Tom Wolff

In the field of healthy communities, there exists a conflict between those who focus on power-based social change (community organizing) and relationship-based social change (community building). Where those who use the power-based approach believe that, in order to affect change, citizens must form organizations that aim to transform and redistribute power, the relationship-based approach works for change by building strong, caring and respectful relationships among all members of a community. Extremists from both sides feel the two approaches are incompatible, find fault with the other side: power-based organizing is faulted for its inability to build relationships for fear of slipping into social services and co-optation; relationship-based organizing is said to discourage individuals from becoming engaged in political action and power-brokering for fear of violating established relationships.

This conflict arises frequently, and I believe that addressing it will be a challenge for all of us in the field of healthy communities in the coming years. Below are a few examples of how we have come face to face with this conflict. One situation involved a potential funder. He said that we could work together as long as we agreed on basic goals. For this organization, one of the keys was building relationships. I wondered whether relationship building was in line with our work and they responded that political action wasn't necessarily community building. Further discussion actually expanded the possibility for both to exist, but the dilemma was again posed.

A second example involves a community we have been working with for 15 years, in close cooperation with the local hospital. (In fact, the Vice President of the hospital is the chair of our Coalition Advisory Board.) This small, rural hospital is now having to create a strategic partnership with an outside hospital system, either a large for-profit or a large nonprofit. In this situation, our coalition has taken the stance of trying to bring this issue to the forefront in the community, identifying potential sources of assistance including the Attorney General's office, the Department of Public Health, and the advocacy group Health Care For All. This has created an ongoing and serious strain on our relationships, both personal and organizational, with the hospital. Maintaining our personal relationships while preparing for the significant organizational and power challenges of dealing with a new, for-profit hospital in the community, is a significant and delicate tightrope to walk.

Finally, we have a service contract with a state agency to work on health care access issues. As part of the contract, we hold forums during which the shortcomings of the funding agency can be pointed out, and we work hand in hand with an advocacy organization that often advocates for changes in that state agency. Once again, we walk the fine line.

In each of these situations, social change requires a mix of advocacy and relationship building. As our literature doesn't give us much basis for this, how do we proceed?

Inspiration came to me in a weekly Jewish meditation service I attend. There, as part of the Amidah, I found this quote: "To be holy is for power and beauty to be in perfect harmony." This quote grabbed me immediately; I wrote it down, pondered it, meditated on it. It seems to me that it spoke to significant issues in the world. Later, I understood that it applied to the dilemma I have been writing about in this column.

What the quote suggests is that there may be a way to find harmony between building relationships and dealing with power issues. This harmony may be the future of healthy communities, coalition building and community development in this country. Either approach taken by itself will not work very effectively when we think of building a community. I have seen occasions in which confrontational community organizing techniques have damaged relationships, as well as those time when, no matter how good the relationships are, those in power say “Sorry, we can’t change the system, no matter how much I like you.”

On the other hand, I have also seen many examples of how these two approaches can work together. In one community, our coalition ended up in conflict with a hospital. We were working on community benefits, as designated by the Attorney General. The hospital’s community benefits committee was made up of 22 members, 18 of whom were hospital employees or affiliates. We protested, went to the media, and pushed hard for the process to be opened up. (The hospital wasn’t happy.) Our vision was that we wanted to be partners with the hospital, not back it into a corner. Leadership was changing at the hospital, and we became members of the search committee. Since the arrival of the new CEO, we have been in partnership with the hospital and it’s new leader in moving forward on healthy communities initiatives. In this case, we clearly used power-oriented community organizing tactics, but we also held the goal of ultimately creating a partnership with the hospital.

I suggest that we look at our work in a new way, create new theories and a new collection of anecdotes that match the needs of social change at this period in history. We cannot ignore power issues in a country where the separation between rich and poor has become extreme, for-profit hospitals are becoming more prevalent, dollars dominate elections, the media is controlled by a handful of individuals, and black and Hispanic young men are being incarcerated at alarming rates. As we have seen a decline in civic engagement and volunteerism, and a decreased sense of neighborhood and community, we cannot ignore relationship building. We need both, and we need models that will allow us to have both.

We are anxious to hear and possibly publish stories, examples and theories of how we can proceed in our work, melding community building and community organizing. For, indeed, “to be holy is for power and beauty to be in perfect harmony.” Email me at twolff@ahcpartners.org