

Saul Alinsky Model of Community Organization Practice

Module Details

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Learner's Objectives

1. Learners will be able to comprehend Saul Alinsky's model of organizing in the community.
2. Introduction of qualities essential in community organizers to learners.
3. Learners able to use the process for organizing communities.

Introduction

This module on Saul Alinsky's model of community organization is drawn largely from his book *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. This is the last book written by Saul Alinsky and published in 1971. This book was his effort to impart his theory and methods of organizing to the coming generations of community organizers. The book largely draws upon his own experiences of organizing communities. He presented a clear set of rules for community organizing which becomes a foundation for a model of social work practice at the level of community.

Saul Alinsky (1909 - 1972) was an American community organizer and writer. He is popularly known as the founder of Modern Community Organizing. He pioneered a method of helping the poor and working class people to organize themselves in order to improve their communities. Alinsky did not just theorize community organization, he was an organizer. His work is a very significant reference point when thinking about organizing communities so as to enable people in the community to get a share of power. From an early age Alinsky was interested in the dynamics of power and the interaction between those who had power (Haves) and those who were denied power (Have Nots).

Philosophy

Saul Alinsky was of the opinion that problems facing communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions but from lack of power to implement these solutions. Thus, any social change must be preceded by a passive, affirmative and non-challenging attitude among the masses. He believed that since people are naturally fearful of change, they avoid or resist it. Therefore they must feel so frustrated, so defeated, so lost, so futureless in the existing system that they are willing to let go of the past and change the future. The only way for communities to build long term power is by organizing people and resources around a common vision. This is a gradual process built over a period of time through the engagement of the community organizer with the community people.

Relying on *gradualism*, *infiltration* and *dialectic process*, rather than a bloody revolution, Alinsky's model of community organization practice was so subtle that very few people ever noticed the deliberate changes. Each of the three concepts in italics are explained below.

Gradualism – Alinsky's brand of revolution (tactic for bringing about social change) was not characterized by dramatic, sweeping, overnight transformations of social institutions. He viewed revolution as a slow, patient process. Therefore, the community organizer will be able to create mass organizations in order to seize power and give it to the people for realizing the democratic dream of equality, peace and justice. The only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and resources around commonly identified issues.

Infiltration -- To bring about this reformation among masses, the community organizer must work inside the system. The trick was to penetrate existing institutions such as churches, unions and political parties. He advised community organizers to quietly, subtly gain influence within the decision making ranks of these institutions and to introduce changes from that platform. Alinsky's emphasis on the importance of working inside the system in

order to bring about any change originated in his belief that the system had the potential for change. So, he urged young community organizers to begin their work from within the system, making an effort to understand the realities of the system, the operational mechanisms, the various stakeholders involved therein and their roles and responsibilities.

Dialectic Process -- Alinsky's prescription of social change required grassroots organizing that taught community people to help themselves by confronting government and corporations to obtain the resources and power to improve their lives. The key to community organization is that it is not about winning any one issue. It is about building broad coalitions and training community members to conduct campaigns that let them win on several issues. Community organizers need to focus on building community and power. Issues are simply the tools for this building process. Alinsky emphasized on leadership of the community organizer as an indispensable element in the success of community organizing.

Saul Alinsky had a particular stand on the subject of *means and ends*. He believed that an individual's concern with the ethics of means (processes employed) and ends (transfer of power from Haves to Have Nots) varies inversely with one's personal engagement with the issue in consideration and with one's distance from the scene of conflict. The deeper was an individual's engagement with the issue lesser would he be concerned with the moral underpinnings of action that is being planned and implemented. He was critical of those who criticized the morality of actions they were not involved in. For him the further people are away from the conflict, the more they fuss over delicacies of morality.

According to Alinsky the understanding of means and the ethics of achieving the desired goals is dependent upon the position of the two parties involved in conflict for power. Both parties engaged in conflict will claim and need to claim that the opposition's stand is immoral and that their own means are ethical and rooted in the highest of human values. Each party will find ways to judge the methods of opposition as immoral or unethical, even if they themselves are using the same.

In war the end justifies the means. Alinsky was of the opinion that once an action has ended, the means can be justified /rationalized as consistent and moral. Using the example of passive resistance strategy of Mahatama Gandhi, Alinsky explained that Gandhi not only made a practical use of the strategy but invited it against the British colonizers to win independence from them. However, interestingly eight months after securing independence the Indian National Congress outlawed passive resistance as a crime.

Principles of Alinsky's Model of CO Practice

1. A community organizer working in an open community is in an ideological dilemma to begin with. He does not have a fixed or pre-determined set of objectives to initiate work.
2. Community situations in the early phase of his/her work are relative and dynamic (ever changing). He/she must be alert to respond to the ever changing situations.

3. Community organizer must be resilient, adaptable to shifting political circumstances and sensitive enough to the process of action and reaction so as to avoid being trapped by their own tactics and be forced to take steps not in favour of community.
4. Whenever we think about social change, the question of means and ends arises. The end is what you want and the means is how you get it. Community organizer views the issue of means and ends in practical and strategic terms. He/she assesses the available resources and the possibilities of various courses of action. The ends are viewed only in terms of whether they are achievable or not and worth the cost. The means are viewed only in terms of whether they will work.
5. The most unethical of all means is the non-use of any means. The means and ends moralists constantly obsessed with ethics of means used by the "Have Nots" against the "Haves" should introspect (search within) themselves as to their real political position. Their obsession with ethical means turns them into allies of "Haves" and enemies of "Have Nots".
6. Change comes from power and power comes from organization. From the moment community organizer enters the community, he/she lives and dreams only one thing and that is to build mass power. Until he/she has built the mass power base, he/she does not take up any major issues.
7. Until the community organizer has mass power base, his/her tactics are very different from power tactics. His/her every move revolves around one central point – how many recruits will this bring into the organization.
8. It is academic to draw a line between purpose and process. Purpose tells why and process tells us how. Both are a part of the same continuum since purpose drives process.
9. Tactics are those conscious, deliberate acts by which human beings live with each other and deal with the world around them. In community organization we our concern is with the tactic of wresting (taking away) power by the "Have Nots" from the "Haves".
10. The most important role of community organizer is to agitate till the point of conflict in order to bring about change.

Strategies of Organizing the Community

Community organizing begins with the premise that the problems facing communities do not result from lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions.

1. Community Organizations are based on many issues. Therefore, the community organizer's first job is to identify or create issues or problems on which there is a need to work. He must search controversies and issues rather than avoid them, as unless there is controversy people are not concerned enough to act.
2. A community organizer must stir up dissatisfaction and discontent in the community. The organizer must rub raw the resentments of people of the community and fan the latent hostilities of many people to the point of overt expression.

3. According to Alinsky, the opposition must be portrayed as the very personification of evil, against whom any and all methods were a fair game.
4. He/she must create a mechanism that can drain off the underlying guilt for having accepted the previous situation for so long a time. Out of this mechanism arises a new community.
5. The job then is to get the community people to move, to act, to participate. In other words, to develop and harness the necessary power to effectively challenge and conflict the existing/prevaling situations and change them.
6. The key to community organizing is about creating broad coalitions and training community members to conduct campaigns on issues and problems that let them win.

Tactics for Community Organization

1. Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have. According to Alinsky if one has mass support, one should flaunt it. If one does not have mass support, one should give an impression to the opposite camp that there is mass support. The point here is that more the number of people associated with the organization, more is the power. It is important that the "Have Nots" have an experience of feeling powerful, the source of which in their case is in large numbers. The "Haves" on the other hand have political connections and other sources of power but not numbers which the masses have. Therefore making a show of mass support by the community organizer to the "Haves" creates discomfort for them.
2. Never go outside the experience of your people because when a tactic or an action is outside the experience of your people, the result is confusion, fear and retreat. Community organizer needs to plan events or action in which the community people are well versed or are prepared well. Otherwise the chances of planned action being unsuccessful become quite high.
3. Wherever possible go outside the experience of opposite camp. Look for ways to increase insecurity, anxiety and uncertainty in them. As a corollary to the above mentioned tactic, the community organizer must seek information about the opposite camp which will result in action from the community people for which the opposite camp was unprepared. This unpreparedness on their part can be capitalized by the community organizer in unsettling the opposite camp further.
4. Make the opposite camp live up to its rules. The "Haves" (opposite camp) usually have two sets of rules or codes of conduct – one for the "Have Nots" and the other for their own selves. Alinsky states that the planned tactic should be such that the opposite camp is pushed into following the rules that it had laid down for the 'Have Nots'. Practically all people live in a world of contradictions. They espouse a morality which they do not practice. This dilemma should be fully utilized by the organizers.
5. Ridicule is man's most potent weapon. It is almost impossible to counter ridicule. The community organizer must plan tactics which are ridiculing some aspect of the opposite camp. This will infuriate them and elicit a reaction which can be used to the advantage of the community organization.

6. A corollary to the above is that a good tactic is one that the community people enjoy. Therefore the combination of ridicule of opposite camp through a tactic which community people enjoy will surely bring success for the organization.
7. A tactic that drags too long becomes a drag. Community can sustain interest in any issue or problem for a limited period of time only. Therefore community organizer should plan a series of small actions rather than one prolonged action.
8. Keep the pressure on. Saul Alinsky is of the opinion that the community organizer should not rest if he/she has got partial victory. Therefore success comes from keeping the pressure on with the use of different tactics and actions each subsequent action building on the previous one. Therefore the development of operations to maintain a constant pressure on the opposite camp will result in reactions that are essential for the success of the campaign.
9. The threat is usually more terrifying than the event itself. The community organizer should plan action in a manner that the opposite camp is always wondering what would be coming next. This saps a lot of energy and time of the opposite camp.
10. The organizer should judiciously choose to initiate only those battles which they stood a very good chance of winning. The organizer's job is to begin to build confidence and hope in the idea of organization and thus within the community people themselves. To begin with limited victories and go on to bigger victories.
11. The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative i.e. the community organizer must have in his/her mind a resolution to the problem to be suggested to the opposite camp when the stage for negotiations arrives.

Qualities of a Good Community Organizer

Alinsky had no patience for those organizers who were content to talk about the changes they wanted but were unwilling to actively work for those changes. He favored organizers who were prepared to take bold, decisive action designed to transform society even if that transformation could be achieved slowly, incrementally. He taught that the organizer's first task was to make people feel that they were wise enough to diagnose their own problems, find their own solutions and determine their own destinies.

1. Imagination is the dynamic quality that starts and sustains him in his life of action as an organizer. It ignites and fuels the force that drives him to organize for change.
2. Ego is essential in community organizer to reach out for the highest level of organizing that any man can reach out for.
3. Curiosity is needed in the community organizer for raising questions that lead to breaking of existing patterns of living and functioning in the community and lead to agitation for social change.
4. Irreverence is an essential quality for organizer since nothing is sacrosanct. The community organizer detests dogma and defies any finite definition of morality.
5. A sense of humor is must is a must since satire and ridicule and most weapons of a community organizer.
6. Organized personality with confidence in presenting the right reasons for his actions only.

Conclusion

Alinsky's ideas were somewhat controversial, but these were practical and effective for social change and successfully organizing communities. The rules and principles propounded by him are a practical toolkit to bring effective social change through leveraging with those in power.