

BROAD-BASED ORGANISING

Ciaran Leonard, an Oblate priest working in Liverpool, recently gave an interesting talk on this topic in the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. Although the concept may be familiar to many community activists, this brief account may be of interest to others.

Broad-Based Organising (BBO) originated in the U.S. as a way of addressing issues of concern to local communities. It got much of its inspiration from the writings of Saul Alinski who wrote Rules for Radicals in the 1930s, but the process has been much refined since then. There is no central world-wide organisation - each city or area is responsible only to itself.

BBO is based on a system of house-meetings. At these meetings there is brainstorming about the issues that put stress on you and your family and your community - issues such as drugs or housing. These local meetings can culminate in well-organised public meetings of perhaps 1,000 people, where somebody puts questions to some influential individual. This is called 'public business'. In a city or area there may be a number of different units, centred around houses or institutions, and these may form a region.

There are some basic principles in BBO. One is that it is best if people directly affected by an issue can handle it themselves. Another is that BBO won't take on an issue it can't win. For instance BBO would not take on the issue of unemployment, but it would campaign against the closure of a particular factory. BBO would not take on the whole drugs issue, but might try to challenge a particular pusher. Part of the process of BBO is to break the issue down into its parts.

BBO is not involved just with single issues. This week it might deal with unemployment, on another occasion drugs or housing etc. It looks to create a broad base of people around these issues. BBO mobilises institutions like the Churches.

BBO is open to people irrespective of religious belief. However it is based on a commitment to values, such as justice, peace, dignity, respect, and neighbourliness, and those involved must subscribe to these values.

BBO seeks to take power. It sees people giving away their power too easily, - voting every four or five years with no further involvement. Organised money can

get things done, that is one kind of power. BBO does not have that. The alternative is organised people, but for this you need numbers and this is central to BBO strategy. BBO is based on the concept of accountable power that has the ability to effect real change.

In the case of much local action, BBO recognizes that people get fed up going to meetings. Leaders get into posts and stay too long. BBO requires that people are available for whatever time they can afford. This may be a commitment of two hours a week, but they are accountable for these two hours.

BBO trains people to deal with issues. It helps people to identify who are the significant people and who can do things. It trains them to formulate some action. They organise what they call accountability sessions. This may involve some individual, say from the Housing Department, and get them to give a public commitment, something they can be held accountable for.

BBO also recognizes that if you are dependent on finance you have given away your power. The group needs to be financially independent and the members contribute. A Church may opt to join and a membership rate of £1,000 or £2,000 might be set. Fund raising events are organised. A full-time organiser is paid, and transport to venues for mass meetings is another important expense.

There is never one leader in the group, so no individual can be targeted. In making representations there is always a minimum of three people and a maximum of ten. The three to go this time might not be the same three as last time. BBO goes after the people in the community who have contacts. They may be people whom everybody goes to when they have a problem. People who are identified who have a following. These people will play the crucial role of recruiting people for mass meetings. This means that if the BBO organiser tells, say, a public representative, that 1,000 people will attend a meeting, then 1,000 actually will attend. Absolute commitment to attend meetings like this is crucial to BBO.

BBO always operates within the law and takes care not to jeopardize anyone's job, e.g. a civil servant who may be a valuable contact.

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How BBO Works in Practice

In practice BBO works something like this. A group of people meet. They will start the meeting by identifying issues and prioritising them. In Liverpool there are 44 local units. Issues are fed to a central strategy group and these will pass on selected items to a small research group who have more time. Training is provided to groups to deal with a selected issue, and in particular how to do public business e.g. to stand up and speak.

In Liverpool one issue was fly-tipping (illegal dumping). The Central Strategy Group saw this as winnable, got in touch with people in local government, and set targets. They also put up proposals of their own. At a public meeting the council gave a commitment to clear 30 sites.

BBO seeks allies, but it has no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. For instance, it may seek help from the police in certain situations but may challenge them in other situations.

In Bristol the issue of homelessness was identified as important. People noted that the Building Societies were making big profits repossessing homes. BBO proposed that they should give one per cent of their profits to the agencies for the homeless. To influence events 1,000 people joined one of the building societies so that they could attend the A.G.M. A thousand people turned up. They did not get the one per cent, but they did get a lot of money for the agencies.

The key to BBO is organising large numbers of people. The basic involvement of most people is that they leave their phone numbers and are available to be bussed into City Hall etc. maybe three times a year. BBO does not seek to have issues solved immediately, and tries to build up people in the process. In Liverpool the Churches have played a central role, and the Moslem community have become very involved. Most of the units in Liverpool are centred around Catholic Churches and there are also a few tenants associations. Sometimes four or five units in an area will deal with issues in that area.

Obviously some of the people involved in BBO give a lot of time to it. The paid organizer may be very busy indeed. Other people may put in ten hours or more a week. Others may contract only to be at the other end of a phone line. The generosity of many individuals is crucial to success and there is no magic formula that can substitute for this.