

The Leader as *Community Organizer*

An addendum prepared by Lew Rhodes - November 10, 2008

For those who have read the October 2008 Ongoing Discussion *Thought Piece*, and its use of a different “lens” for understanding and thinking about the fundamental nature of organizations, here are some additional “thoughts” about what the recent election looked like when viewed through it.

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THE LEADER AS *COMMUNITY ORGANIZER*

With the election over, pundits are looking back and beginning to debate *how* it happened. But it will be more important that their understanding of the Obama administration’s future strategies and tactics be based on an understanding of *why* it happened -- the unique nature of the *thinking* that framed and structured it. While Obama will be rightly credited for both out-strategizing McCain and for his smarter on-the-ground tactics, both emerged from a different source -- a community organizer’s way-of-thinking.

Is that really different? And, in terms of our country’s future, is the need to understand that difference good news or bad news?

- First, its difference. It is a framing worldview generated from a *bi-polar* vision.

(1) At one end, the more familiar concept of “vision” as goals and purposes that serve as the direction-setting “light at the end of the tunnel.” And

(2) At the other, (the one which is the difference that makes the difference) – a vision that casts light at this end of the tunnel where the journey has no choice but to start. A light that focuses a critical natural resource already on the ground over which the leader has little choice – the *thinking* of the people to be “led.”

Several decades ago I heard a community organizer say -- “*Change comes when the contained recognize the shape of the container.*” This most recent experience reinforces the understanding that this “container” is not “out there,” but in our own mindsets.

- Second, understanding this intrinsic nature becomes a critical strategic factor because it serves as the base for envisioning the tactical possibilities for moving from “here” to “there.” That’s why the “*how’s*” of Obama’s campaign generated unexpected levels of participation and resources (that the pundits are now struggling to understand.)

Consider how, for example, Obama’s use of the term “Hope” reflected the power of this understanding. As a “community organizer” Obama knew that for “hope” to transform into reality, it has to be rooted in the visions of the *led*, not the leader. The generator of hope is not just the “plum” in a future dream, but the sense that something can be done about it now, and that one can play a meaningful role doing it. Together, they generate a belief that “*Yes, we can.*”

Thus the roots of the “hope” that Obama was talking about became embedded in people’s personal vision of present possibilities, not just in a leader’s vision. It was a sense of an opportunity to make a difference in a future portrayed by that leader’s

vision. Both visions were important: one vision provided a needed external “pull,” the other the critical internal “push.” It was his “talk,” but their “walk.”

- So, suddenly, what Obama *knew* from experience worked at a community level now has worked nationally. We’ve seen... and *experienced*... its positive results.

What could be the “bad new” about that?” The answer comes from the entanglement of the *means* and *ends* of “community organizing.”

If we recall how the term “community organizer” was used by one side during the campaign, this way of thinking and acting is not generally thought of as “leadership.” Especially by someone with “executive” responsibilities.

Moreover, the “processes” community organizers use are not trusted. They don’t easily make sense within the ways-of-thinking that frame social problem solving. That’s because they involve a “particles” and wave” complementarity. They function, *organizationally*, in the white spaces between agencies, programs, and branches of government. And, at the same time, are driven by the thinking of *individuals* within them.

These processes work because they engage the power of individual thinking at all levels (or ends) so that bridges of connected organizational strategies and tactics can be built. In the right hands (and minds) these can become collaborative problem-solving settings that generate the thinking and answers the leaders didn’t have at the beginning.

On election night in Chicago, Obama -- noting the challenging goals he envisioned -- said he is “hopeful” we will get there. But his hope, which I share, is based on a community organizer’s “*trust in the process.*” A trust developed from experience.

The challenge for the rest of us now is to find better ways to learn from our recent personal and national experiences. Experiences that seemed to transform the self-interested question “*what’s-in-it-for-me,*” into one in which the answers were opportunities to make a meaningful difference in the leader’s future vision of what’s in it for *all of us.*

Will the pundits help us now to reflect on our own thinking over the past two years and connect it to what a “community-organizing leader” was doing and saying? If he’s to get the public support he needs, I *hope* so.