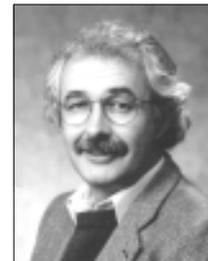


REALITY CHECK

A village delivers a refresher course on the meaning of empowerment



MIKE LEWIS

Yesterday I started the day thinking I would work in my home office. If only life was so simple. Instead, before I knew it, I was off to a remote westcoast community to chair a meeting of First Nations people. I returned at 2:30 the next morning via helicopter. Bizarre how life goes at times.

The context for the meeting was dramatic: a community up in arms about their lack of authority over eight companies which they presumably owned, but about which they knew little. The companies provided community members with few benefits and virtually no access to information. A former leader, who was president and director of every company, was up on the carpet. People felt betrayed by what appeared to be self-dealing and corruption. For years they had vainly sought answers to a lot of pertinent questions. This meeting looked like the showdown. A core of people had done their homework and were prepared to go to the wall to expose the truth. Either the questions would be answered or heads would roll.

My role was to make sure the meeting stayed on track and fair to all the parties. I was known and trusted by many community members. In 1974 I had lived in the tiny village for six months to help develop a co-operative in the forest sector. Some 24 years later, here I was seeing the angry, confused results of that promising beginning.

As a person committed to building effective community economic development organizations, this sad, yet exceedingly hopeful 8-hour marathon gave me much to reflect upon. Some important lessons I have learned over the last quarter century were reinforced.

First, empowerment, a now common cliché, is critical to making a difference in the lives of individuals and communities. We can't just talk the talk, we must walk the walk. This truth was revealed in spades during the meeting. All the right buttons were pushed in the presentation of the "leader": the importance of vision, building self-reliance, independence, preparing leadership for responsibility, the importance of unity, and so on. The rhetoric was powerful but hollow. Person after person raised questions that cut through to the core. Why is there no information? Why is there no accountability and involvement? Why is the community excluded from decision-making? Why is power so concentrated in one person? Where is

the money going? Why are so few of the jobs going to our people? The answers were unsatisfactory and evasive. The people had been denied their right to participation and would not be put off. Change was in the air.

Second, organization is key to empowerment. "If you ain't organized you ain't going to contend," was Saul Alinsky's old saying. I would add, if you aren't organized *democratically* or lack strong commitment to local accountability, organizations can and will become moribund vehicles at the service of narrow interests.

In fact, this community has a plethora of organizations. It has a trust, a subsidiary holding company, and several companies in forestry and fisheries. But the companies were not understood, there was no accountability, there was no means by which community priorities might influence the re-investment of profits. Nor was there linkage between the business of the companies and the development of people. What's worse, the white man's legal tools had been used to camouflage and facilitate control by one person and to disempower the membership.

In accordance with the old adage, absolute power had corrupted absolutely. Up on the carpet was a friend of 25 years who had lost touch with what had been the source of his original energy: a commitment to empower his people. He had lost his grounding. His dilemma was profoundly sad to watch.

Which leads to my third point. Values and vision are important. There is no doubt that technical skills and expertise are important. But the CED mission, unless exercised in the context of values that express a collective vision, will often fail to serve the broader public interest. When the corrupted leader pleaded his case with an appeal both to the history of the community's progress and to "its vision of the future," the irony was devastating. Fatally, he had assumed that his personal vision was synonymous with the vision of the community. The result was a patronizing depiction of the community's future that justified all his work in terms of the community's interests.

Empowerment, organization, values, and vision - nice words that are deceptively easy to enunciate, but oh so difficult to truly put into effect. Our work is important. We had better be up to it. ↵

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