



ETHICAL AND MORAL DEMANDS OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

It was in 1972 that I read the Playboy interview of Saul Alinsky. Inspired, I decided on the spot to make my profession community organizing. I had done a stint in the military as a radar technician, finished college with a major in sociology, worked as a deputy probation officer and as an executive in a national company, and was then working for the CAO of L.A. County. After reading Alinsky, I thought, that's what I'm going to do for the rest of my life—no more jobs. My idea of “professional” at that moment was getting paid to do what I really wanted to do. I had a lot to learn.

I suppose that for many organizers, the work we do should *not* be called or thought of as a “profession”—maybe an art, a craft, a trade, or just a job, but not a *profession*, with all the baggage that word carries. But my bias is different. I think of police and firefighters as professionals, along with public officials, military personnel, legal aides, chefs, train engineers, long-haul truck drivers, and the like. I don't think that an organizer, whether community, faith-based, or labor, needs to have had a graduate-school education to be a professional.

To do any work well certainly requires know-how and skill, which always grows far beyond formal education and training. What sets apart the day-to-day routine of the professional organizer is not simply a commitment to master the nuts and bolts of the work, but to carry on with an awareness that the well-being of individuals, the community, or even the society hangs in the balance. That responsibility demands dedication to lifelong learning, so complacency about knowledge and skill is never acceptable.

Another benchmark of professionalism is willingness to pay almost any personal price, sacrifice almost any self-interest (possibly excluding family and personal health) to fulfill the mission of the profession. The professional puts aside comfort, convenience, and career advancement for the sake of the mission, modeling

that commitment for co-workers, because the success of the mission requires the same attitude and action by a corps of similarly dedicated individuals.

Ethics and Morality

But the bedrock of any profession is the ethical and moral character of its practitioners. If their character is lacking, they're much less likely to be helpful to others. This is certainly true of organizers, because building relationships that foster trust is the profession's *sine qua non*. Our relationships with members support their risk-taking, which is indispensable to their becoming leaders, which is both the primary objective and the method of the profession. Growth in leadership capability, not only in knowledge and skill but self-confidence and courage to act, occurs when organizers, whose ethical and moral character is trusted, challenge individuals to take on jobs that require them to risk going beyond their previous experience and comfort zone. The relationship of trust implicitly assures them that the job is necessary, worth the risk, and doable; that they have the attributes to do it; and that organizers are not using them as organizational cannon-fodder.

Our empathy for the hopes and fears of our members, as evidenced by our words and deeds, shows we are trustworthy. Wrongdoing presupposes acting without empathy; adding, if only bit by bit, to the poverty, oppression, and injustice they suffer, aggravating their psychic, emotional, political, and economic harm. The take-away is that when we lack empathy, when we show we are not trustworthy, they refuse to rely on us.

Of course, we like to think that organizers are always trustworthy, invariably working against wrongdoing. Yet my experience is that a significant percentage of organizers, at least on rare occasions, do not act with ethical and moral sensibility. And at times I have been among them.

In regard to *character*, over the last 50-plus years I have known organizers who lied on the job, who were drinking and drugging during work-hours, who thought nothing of wasting the time of leaders, and who robbed people of their dignity by bulldozing, bamboozling, and shaming them into action. I know of organizers who, in opposition to the majority of their organization's leaders, hijacked control of their organization, perverting bylaws and sabotaging democratic decision-making to promote their own agenda (ultimately to ill effect). These examples of ethical and moral insensibility decreased the organizational mileage of their organizations, reducing their progress for a given investment of resources, hence undermining their missions—some slightly, some significantly.

In regard to *competency*, I have seen the effects of marginal organizers: those who didn't thoroughly prepare for meetings, actions, campaigns, and negotiations; and those who were unwilling or unable to invest themselves in learning or who failed to admit their shortcomings, never mind work to overcome them.

Becoming a Professional

What are the basic principles and practices that can raise our organizing to an ethical and moral profession?

We may move in that direction by accepting that in “professing” organizing, we are called to declare ourselves worthy of the *honor* and *privilege* of faithful allegiance to a higher purpose, wholeheartedly accepting its lifetime obligations. But what purpose, and what obligations?

The purpose for organizers in our tradition is that, regardless of our optimism or pessimism at any moment, we profess faithful allegiance to *the individual and collective empowerment of the powerless*. We believe it to be the most promising strategic vision to strengthen both democratic institutions and the moral-spiritual values that fully humanize those institutions. Accordingly, we take to heart the wisdom that in a democratic society, without righteousness, there is no truth; without truth, there is no justice; without justice, there is no freedom; without freedom, there is no peace; and without peace, there is no compassion. We have witnessed that domino effect institutionally during the last four years of the Trump administration.

The obligations of the profession demand that we put the interests of the people we're organizing ahead of our own interests, even when they seem unappreciative, undeserving, and unprepared. We are obligated to make lifelong commitments to their well-being, without shortchanging them for the sake of our own convenience, comfort, or career, regardless of our misgivings, even when we doubt the ultimate usefulness of what they or we are doing. The honor of our profession is that we do this work unstintingly, completely devoted to the uplifting of the individuals and communities we

help to empower. And we are rewarded when they in turn affirm the value of our work by taking risks to change the conditions of their individual lives and their communities, relying first on our character, then on our competence.

Although we may see ourselves as progressives in regard to political, economic, and social issues, professionally we eschew ideology, except for the Jeffersonian variety to empower the demos. Committed socialists, communists, anarchists, libertarians, etc. do better when they join with activists and organizations that share their convictions. In our tradition of organizing, whether faith-based, labor, or community, our job is not to create ideologues or political clones in our own image, but to enlarge the power of the people—individually and collectively—to act together through democratic dialogue and decision-making that ensures the realization of *their* will.

We can help them with needed research, democratic processes, media relations, campaigning, negotiations, fundraising, and a host of organizational challenges. But fundamentally, our most useful role is to know, given the status of the organizing, the strategic and tactical questions that require answers—not to answer them, but to propose them to the suitable levels of leaders. We may not always agree with their decisions and actions, because either they or we are mistaken. In either event, the organization belongs to them, since only they can drive it forward, and we do not experience the consequences of its life as they do. We are not their minders; we are not in charge of them; and we cannot save them from all of their mistakes, any more than they can save us from all of ours. In the best of all possible circumstances, both they and we continue to learn and thrive together, and both their dignity and our own is respected.

The on-the-job obligations of ethical and moral organizing have three building-blocks, because claims of professionalism without them end up as mostly lip-service:

Lifelong self-analysis in professional practice demands the day-to-day discipline of reviewing and recording our thinking, motives, and actions, and the reactions of others to our words and deeds. Nothing is to be dismissed or forgotten, no matter how embarrassing or deflating. Self-analysis requires that we step outside of ourselves. We do not relate to our work as we lived it, possibly preoccupied with thoughts of inadequacy and embarrassment when we make mistakes. Instead, we struggle to see ourselves as others see us, and we observe and document our work dispassionately. Self-analysis requires that we open our minds and record an unexpurgated version of our performance on the job.

Lifelong self-criticism demands that all our documented experience is grist for the analytical mill. The danger is that we become overwhelmed by embarrass-

ment or shame, distracting ourselves from the discipline of self-criticism. We may make mistakes because of slackness, ignorance, poor judgment, selfishness, even conspicuous ethical or moral failure; but none of these are incurable if we are willing to accept our shortcomings for the sake of self-improvement. Self-criticism requires not wasting time and energy on guilt, embarrassment, or self-image; it requires us to clarify why and how we made the mistakes and how we can avoid repeating them in the future. Self-criticism means that we drop all our rationalizations and excuses for our competency and character flaws.

Lifelong self-transformation is professional community organizing's sine qua non. Transforming ourselves hinges on the question: Am I willing to pay the price to overcome my shortcomings? The price may be embarrassment, like admitting we need additional training; humiliation, say from acknowledging our selfishness or venality; or censure or demotion, because we have lied or cheated. But growth has costs and, when we take up the cause of our own growth, the greatest costs can produce the greatest growth.

Self-transformation demands dedication to improving one's work for the benefit of those we serve. It requires inviting leaders, colleagues, trainers, supervisors, and consultants to participate in our self-analysis, self-criticism, and self-transition. The irony is that in most circumstances, open admission of ordinary foibles and failures—say, “I inflated the numbers at my last leaders' group meeting because I was embarrassed by the poor turnout” or “at the action I ended up talking to the press instead of getting a leader prepped so I wouldn't miss my dinner”—may produce little more in fellow organizers than a flash of self-recognition. Self-transformation requires sufficient backbone to accept the cost of redeeming ourselves to carry out the mission of our profession.

Teamwork Culture

As professionals, the remedy for our shortcomings of character and competency is reciprocal accountability for one another. We can meet the challenge of questionable character with ethical and moral team culture, which is strengthened by three principles: (a) that we are one another's models, both intentionally and inadvertently, so it is always worthwhile to uphold high standards of character, not only when we intend to be modeling; (b) that we succeed in our mission when we are all for one and one for all, so it is always worthwhile to give hands-on help generously when colleagues are struggling, not wait until they are drowning; and (c) that we want to avoid allowing either the successes or the failures of colleagues to go unnoticed, so besides routine evaluations, it is always worthwhile to provide individual praise when deserved and follow-up mentoring, not act like we are all lone cowboys out on

the range. These are professional obligations we owe to one another.

Along with promoting aspects of character, like honesty and integrity, at our best we also reinforce one another's growth in knowledge and skill, discipline, selflessness, loyalty, persistence, and courage. These are all qualities of character and personality we know to be indispensable to the success of organizing.

The connection between (a) ethics and morals and (b) knowledge and skill may not be obvious. Although character and competence are related, the particulars are often blurred. Working alone, organizers' ethical and moral shortcomings sometimes contribute to their incompetence. “Alone” doesn't necessarily mean we're physically isolated from colleagues; rather, it's when we keep our shortcomings to ourselves. Whatever our wrongdoing and mistakes on the job, we don't talk about them. We don't stop doing them, because we rationalize our wrongdoing as necessary or inconsequential.

The best *initial* response to underperforming staff may *not* be training to improve competence. Sometimes it is more helpful to concentrate first on moral and ethical challenges, which can strengthen an individual's motivation to improve knowledge and skill.

We can learn something about the integration of character-building and skill-building from military organizations. Many rely on team culture that requires highly skilled as well as ethical and moral participation. Enlisted soldiers and officer-trainees must perform in this demanding version of team-building and team-participation; there is no choice if they're going to finish their training and education successfully. My experience is that comparable building of teams in community and faith-based organizing is rare to non-existent. It's probably commonplace to complete one's training as an organizer and still think that success is largely a matter of solo performance.

Staff-Team Meetings

When our professional behavior has been ethically or morally dubious, the best way to improve our character is *not* by silently vowing to reform ourselves. The most effective way to deal with professionally problematic behavior is to reveal it to colleagues. We learn this aspect of professionalism on the job, as a part of building teams and participating on them.

We build professional organizing teams with the greatest potential when our work is fueled by cool anger rather than the hot variety; when we think and act strategically and tactically rather than ideologically; when we are intellectually honest enough and emotionally secure enough to risk revealing our mistakes; when we are unselfconscious learners; and when we respect the essential role of moral-spiritual vision in organizing for the commonweal. Organizing teams with the great-

est long-term promise help to bring about institutional change, because they recognize the critical linkage between family-building, community-building, organization-building, mobilization-building, movement-building, and institution-building. They argue for and against what they believe are good and bad options, regardless of who's promoting them, including higher-ups. In disputes, they're gracious, inviting compromise when basic principles are not at stake. And they back team decisions wholeheartedly, regardless of their individual preferences. These practices encourage unabashed questioning of one another's thinking, always stress-testing options and considering second-order effects before making decisions. As always, guilt, embarrassment, and self-image have no place in the process. When these team attributes are combined, they work to drive from consciousness any thought of offering unhelpful responses to members who make themselves vulnerable by revealing their mistakes.

The ideal staff meeting, then, does not consist of a series of report-monologues. Instead, it's where we propose our ideas about strategy, tactics, and the day-to-day nuts and bolts of the work. It's an opportunity to disarm ourselves, pull our own covers, report embarrassing information about our competence and character, and hear—without defensiveness—the reactions and suggestions of our colleagues.

David Mann, who radiated competence as an or-

ganizer, taught me some of the how-to of this process when he was the Project Director of the PICO (now, Faith in Action) Orange County (CA) project. Every week, we submitted our staff notes to David, describing our work in detail—reporting problems and mistakes. At the follow-up staff meeting, we reviewed the highlights of our previous week's work, giving the entire staff an opportunity to lend their knowledge, skill, and moral support to the demands of analyzing, criticizing, and transitioning. Then each of us laid out our plans for the coming week's work, once again giving the entire staff an opportunity to be helpful. There was no time for the diversions of guilt, embarrassment, or self-image. We understood that mistakes are inevitable, but repeating them need not be; and that, together, dedication to the obligations of our profession and its mission is how we avoid repeating them.

Should we pay more attention to the ethical and moral demands of our profession than we have been? Yes, absolutely, because given the objectives of organizing, we need every advantage we can get, including a culture of professionalism that makes it possible to overcome our occasional ethical and moral muddles and bumbles, which often induce and reinforce incompetence. When we personally have character deficits and we share them with our teammates, we potentiate not only our knowledge and skill, but the progress of our profession and the success of our mission.

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