

PLANNING AND THE GOLDEN RULE

by Arthur Bolton¹

A mother concludes teaching her six year old about the golden rule by saying, "So you see dear, we are here to help others." After thinking about this for a moment the child asks, "And what are the others here for?"

There is great interest in the development of comprehensive solutions to the multiple problems in America's inner cities. But many professionals working to improve conditions in these neighborhoods come to the task with a limited set of methods, learned in professional schools or through experience in bureaucratic environments. These methods can be inappropriate and even counterproductive when the goal, as frequently stated, is to create stronger families and communities.

Try to look at the typical practices of planning, funding and evaluating neighborhood initiatives from the prospective of neighborhood residents.

The standard method of planning solutions for distressed neighborhoods looks something like this:

- A city or county or a private foundation decides to do something about some issue (i.e., violence, teen pregnancy, child abuse). This is often called an "initiative."
- Various "stakeholders" (mostly providers of service) are called together to "collaborate" on developing "a plan."
- Deadlines are set. The plan must be completed by a certain date. Money will flow to those service providers, designated by the plan, to do the work.
- Information will be gathered by the planners, a "needs assessment" may be done, a survey may be conducted to gather opinions of people who live in the neighborhoods where the problem is most severe
- Residents of the neighborhood may even be invited "to represent" the neighborhood on the planning committee.

¹ Reprinted by Allen, Shea & Associates with permission from Art Bolton. Art was for many years the Director of the California Assembly Office of Research. He is also a genuinely interesting and cool person. While this article was written about neighborhoods, substituting "community" or "county" works as well.

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- The planners will deliberate and come to an agreement about what should be done, somebody will write the plan, the budget and the request for funds.
- The plan will usually state specific objectives to be evaluated at predetermined intervals.

It all seems very orderly, reasonable and democratic. But, based on experience, this approach does not seem to have produced significant and lasting improvements in distressed neighborhoods. Why?

The typical methods of planning are flawed for many reasons, including the following:

1. From the very beginning, the initiative often sets boundaries limiting the scope and creativity of solutions. The organization sponsoring the initiative may have its own agenda, which may not fit with the interests and ideas of the “target population” of neighborhood residents.
2. Each of the agencies involved in developing the plan has its organizational needs. Quite often' especially in times of shrinking budgets, agency survival is a foremost concern. So the processes of planning are likely to be tilted to favor the perpetuation and expansion of the services provided by those doing the planning. Alternative solutions that might shift the responsibility and the money away from the collaborating agencies are rarely considered. From the beginning, “the fix is in.”
3. The processes of planning and “needs assessing” can even do harm. Residents of distressed neighborhoods have seen it all before. People descend upon the neighborhood, conduct surveys and “focus groups” and ask questions about the residents' “concerns” and “priorities.” The questions imply a promise to act. The answers are predictable: “We want good jobs, affordable housing, excellent schools, recreation, safe streets, good transportation, good shopping, etc., etc.” And then what? Often, very little. Why do we keep asking people what they want when we are not prepared to act in response to their requests? Nobody likes to be conned.
4. The planning deadlines and implementation schedules are unrealistic. The planners rush to slap something together to meet a deadline. Sometimes a professional grant writer is hired who may have never even seen the neighborhood, but who has a formula for writing successful proposals. Time lines for implementation and evaluation are predetermined. While such schedules may make sense for the production of tires and light bulbs, mechanistic procedures are incompatible with the dynamic characteristics of individual and social life and the processes involved in making changes.

Those who control the funds want to see results delivered and evaluated quickly to justify their investments in a new initiative. (Meanwhile, old service

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systems, under no comparable requirement to demonstrate results, receive funds, year after year, regardless of outcomes.)

Distressed neighborhoods have evolved to their current state, over time. It may take decades to revitalize them with superb schools, thriving businesses and plenty of opportunities for success. A realistic sense of time is an essential prerequisite for developing the leadership and the activities that will produce viable communities.

Instead of designing a few programs intended to fix deep and chronic problems, a more organic approach to planning is required. The goal is the growth of healthy communities. A healthy community evolves in a thousand ways. Which steps are taken at any given time, hardly matters as long as they are all heading in the right direction.

Why does it matter, this year, whether we develop a girls' softball team or a remedial reading program or a seniors' housing project or a youth mentoring program or a community garden? We need to develop them all, and more, over time. The neighborhood doesn't need a plan for "services" as much as it needs internal capability leadership and resources to respond to neighborhood interests and opportunities as they arise. Useful ideas and solutions will bubble-up in a natural way when the right condition for indigenous initiatives exist.

5. What matters most is who will run the programs, get the jobs and do the work. If the collaborating planners are mostly from outside the neighborhood, and the programs produced by the planners are operated by agencies directed from outside the neighborhood, and most of the jobs and money goes to people who live outside the neighborhood, what has really been accomplished?

Once again, the neighborhood will have been used to benefit others like a colony whose resources are drained in exchange for meager benefits. Once again, the neighborhood's dependency will be reinforced. Neighborhood residents will be maintained as "clients" reliant on "services" provided by others. If the money runs out, and the program folds, and the service providers move on to some other project in some other place, what will be left behind?

In the long run, the most important accomplishments are not the delivery of bits of professional service. Building a neighborhood's internal capability to create opportunities' solve its problems, and cope with whatever happens; that is what counts. Neighbors, having a good time working together to get things done; that is what counts. Neighborhood leaders learning, gaining confidence and expanding their influence within the neighborhood and in the larger community; that is what counts. Employing neighborhood residents to provide the help needed by other neighborhood residents and paying them a decent wage for their work; that is what counts.

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Professional “services” can be useful, but they must be integrated at the neighborhood level and wedded to the social fabric of the neighborhood or they will, in the long run, fail as weak patches on a sinking raft.

6. All of the above has implications for the evaluation of results. It is not enough to keep track of the rates of delinquency, poverty, teen pregnancy, school dropouts and the other indices of dysfunction. (In fact, given the costs involved and the state of the art of evaluation, it is extremely difficult to measure accurately the impact of any particular program or intervention upon a particular behavioral symptom.)

In addition to tracking statistical information, we must also conduct thorough assessments of the capability of neighborhood institutions, the relationships among these institutions and the involvement of neighborhood residents in activities that have value to the neighborhood. Just as a strong and healthy family will find solutions and cope with problems, so too will a healthy neighborhood (or city or nation) succeed. An anthropological approach to evaluation must augment epidemiological methods that produce numbers but no wisdom or clue to the dynamics of cause and effect.

In summary, useful planning for neighborhood solutions will promote neighborhood leadership and organizational capacity, not as an after thought or in a patronizing way, but as a primary method for achieving long lasting results.

Will neighborhood people know what to do? Are they really capable? Can they be entrusted to come up with the right answer?, the right program? Can they manage the money? Are they “ready” to assume such responsibilities?

These are the questions that rationalize the status quo. Those with little faith in the power inherent in plain people are reminded that for tens of thousands of years, with little but their own ingenuity and labor, they created villages, cultures, religions and complex institutions of great beauty and they survived. In distressed neighborhoods today, many are succeeding despite great odds. “This old anvil laughs at many broken hammers.” (Sandburg)

Success lies in creating the right opportunities. Professionals, government, and private foundations will improve the chances that neighborhood leaders and neighborhood organizations will succeed when they offer good advice, technical support and the flexible use of funds - enabling them to respond to neighborhood interests in ways they consider to be best. Some controls are always needed. Strings can be put on funds to guarantee that most of the people employed will be neighborhood residents and that planning decisions about programs and priorities will be made in a democratic way by organizations governed by neighborhood residents. Accurate budgeting and accounting and timely reports can also be required. Block grants of this kind, to neighborhoods, could be a wonderful thing.

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The challenge is to let go of methods that don't work, discard mechanistic processes, adopt organic/ecological strategies and reorient professionals, funders and others with power.

These observations and suggestions should not be construed as to castigate all the many goodhearted people with power who are engaged in activities to solve social problems. But every day, and with the best of intentions, good people, in high places, insist on making plans and decisions for others. And every decision they make is one less decision “the others” are allowed to make. Grave consequences flow from this fundamental mistake.