



The Nonprofit Whisperer

"Building Community Agency"

Community organizers impacted by the very issues an agency is addressing may find themselves "organized into the agency's—or what might be called the *elites*'—agenda" rather than "organized in ways that build their self-determination and community agency." In such a situation, the Nonprofit Whisperer advises organizing a group to talk to those in charge about the agency's approach to the work. If no such a dialogue is made welcome, "try to find work that is more aligned with your spirit and thinking." If you do find an opening, be patient: "Culture change takes time."

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DEAR NONPROFIT WHISPERER,
I feel like I am caught in kind of a sneaky vise. My job is to organize people impacted by economic injustice in my neighborhood, a role that feels a little complicated, since I fit in that category and live in that neighborhood. That might not be a problem, except that I am one of a very few organizers in this multiservice agency, and sometimes the conversation around the office reflects a real manipulative bent, as in, "How do we get these people to do that thing that we need for them to make a priority?" So, my job is what? To convince people that the agency's priorities should be theirs?

There is an ethical messiness to it all that is like nails on a chalkboard.

And I get insulted and rageful.

And that is not a good look, apparently, in a professional setting.

It just seems to reinforce the "othering" that begins to feel like the cultural water we swim in every day. It's been put out for us, and we swim in it.

How does an individual who is already othered go about demanding that the water be changed?

Othered

Dear Othered,

Community organizing is noble and incredibly hard work. It is made harder when the organizer (individual employee) has different values, perspectives, and approaches from those of the agency's way of thinking and doing things.

The issue you are running into is incredibly common: Do folks, especially folks impacted by economic injustice, get organized into the agency's—or what might be called the "elites"—agenda, or are they organized in ways that build their self-determination and community agency?

The latter, of course, is what community organizing should be about. It should not be about convincing people that the agency's priorities ought to be theirs, but about building individual and community agency.

The mantra of multiservice and social service agencies should be *working*

with, not doing for. *Working with* means listening to the community residents using the services, as well as others in the community, about what they want and need for themselves, their families, and their community. It is finding out about their vision, their aspirations, and what services they really need versus those that people in power (those whose water we swim in) think are needed. It might be about a shift toward looking at cocreating opportunities with the residents and community while also maintaining the core needed services.

The hard work of leaders at any agency is aligning the community need and vision with those of the folks who actually control the agency—policy-makers and funders. Because local multiservice agencies typically have so many government contracts, they actually have little autonomy. However, what they do have is the ability to listen to people on the ground—frontline staff such as yourself and people in the community—informally, and also formally by gathering data.

Feedback and data can help the agency do several things: (1) Align existing programs as closely as possible with the actual needs of those to whom they are in service; (2) run a small pilot project to see if there are better ways to meet community needs; and (3) advocate for needed change with those who make policy and fund the myriad programs that multiservice agencies operate.

Working with means learning about the “other,” and about everyone sharing perspectives on the water they swim in, to decrease otherness. It’s also about cocreation of a new reservoir of “water” that will source the change that is so needed to move toward a more just and equitable society.

You ask: “How does an individual who is already othered go about demanding that the water be changed?”

Find out if you have any colleagues who share your thinking and feelings. If you do, talk to them about asking for a dialogue with those in charge about the approach to the agency’s community organizing, and if it could be more community centered than agency centered. If you get a “No,” try to find work that is more aligned with your spirit and thinking; if you find an opening, Trusted Space Partners is an organization that works with agencies on the specific issues you are raising.

Among other things, Trusted Space Partners is a team of community organizers and designers who support collaborative community change. They work with institutions like social and multi-service organizations to “make shifts in their operating culture and practices to build more impactful relationships with clients or participants and achieve genuine demand-driven change.”¹

If you do find a glimmer of light for pursuing community organizing collaboratively at your agency, then be patient. Culture change takes time—often three years or more—but you can be the drop in that water that starts the ripple of change on behalf of those you and your agency truly work for: the folks in the community.

NOTE

1. “Institutional Co-Investment,” Trusted Space Partners, accessed August 27, 2019, www.trustedspacepartners.com/our-work.html.

THE NONPROFIT WHISPERER has over thirty years of experience in the nonprofit sector, serving variously as nonprofit staff and board member, foundation staff member, and nonprofit management consultant.

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