

NEVER SAY “HELP”

*Leadership that Instills the Values of
Personal and Community Responsibility*

Richard Low

Juan Rosario refuses to use the word *help* – at least to describe his own work. “We don’t help communities; that word suggests a relationship that reduces people’s responsibility,” says Rosario, a community organizer in Puerto Rico who leads Misión Industrial de Puerto Rico, Inc. “Too many people have learned to behave like victims. They think the solution to their problems will come from outside.”

That’s why, when people ask him for help, he challenges them to first build a team of neighbors, define the problem and suggest action; then he begins to work with them to develop the technical, organizing, and legal knowledge to build a sustainable campaign. “In the long run, democracy is what we are fighting for,” he adds.

Rosario is one of 18 winners of the 2004 Leadership for a Changing World awards, announced October 11, 2004 by the Ford Foundation and its partners, the Advocacy Institute and The Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. Though separated by geographical distance, these leaders share a dedication to the capacity of local people and local communities to solve problems.

“However one feels about the outcome of the recent election, it pointed to the importance of moral values in leadership. LCW award-winners are exemplars of values-based work and community self-reliance,” says Laura Chambers, Vice President of the Advocacy Institute. “Incinerators shouldn’t pollute neighborhoods, predatory lending practices shouldn’t cheat people, and children shouldn’t be poorly nourished. These leaders show that the community owns the solutions to such problems — even when the challenge involves national policy. Their leadership is not leader-centric.”

Two thousand miles from Puerto Rico, Rubén Núñez has no problem using the word *help*. But he does share Rosario’s view about the fundamental nature of leadership.



As lead organizer of Colonias Development Council, in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Núñez and his fellow organizers and community members struggle against the extreme poverty and environmental degradation in the border colonias of southern New Mexico. He has a succinct answer when people ask what his organization is going to do for them: "Nothing! You are going to do it. I am going to help you figure out the *what* and *how!*"

Then there's LCW award recipient Beatrice Clark Shelby, executive director of the Boys, Girls, Adults Community Development Center, in Marvell, Arkansas. "Leadership is like rearing a child," she says, in her no-nonsense way. "When I delegate responsibilities, sometimes I say, 'That is your baby; you need to rock it. You do *not* give the baby back to me unless you have done everything you know how for your baby.'"



Such leaders often describe their values in strikingly traditional terms: self-reliance, local problem solving, and community resilience. A closer look reveals a more complex picture; call it collaborative self-reliance.

Leadership as “Radical Collaboration”

“As one of our early observations of prior LCW winners, we’re noting what we call the ‘leadership paradox’ of social-justice leadership,” says Sonia Ospina, co-director of NYU’s Center for Leadership in Action, which is coordinating the LCW research effort. “This kind of leadership reflects an ability to pursue and meet imperatives that seem very different: doing the right thing but also being financially viable; rooting oneself in a particular community while reaching out to diverse constituencies; balancing the power of individual vision with the power of the collective process.”



This tension poses risk and opportunities for social-justice advocates: paralysis through analysis, or the spark of personal and community transformation.

LCW award-winner Anthony Flaccavento describes his leadership style as “radical collaboration,” which he defines as personal and economic immersion in a community, and sharing its risks. As executive director of Appalachian Sustainable Development, in Abingdon, Virginia, Flaccavento builds cooperative networks to help farmers, loggers, and businesspeople support a troubled regional economy. He operates his own seven-acre, certified-organic farm.

“If there’s a generally a bad year, my farm gets hit just like the others,” says Flaccavento. “Because I also farm and share in the risks and in the successes of our agricultural program, other growers see me as more of a peer” – and more credible. Just as immersion is a keystone of his leadership style, so is his belief in

teaching *by* peers. “When, for instance, a farmer tries a new technique, we bring other farmers to his farm to learn from him. It’s a hands-on approach, and much more effective than telling farmers to go to a Web site.”

Ospina says she and her fellow researchers (which include LCW awardees, who share responsibility for the research) are impressed by how LCW awardees bring their constituents into the organizational structure, and consider them part of the work. “This seems to be an interesting distinction between traditional nonprofit leadership and social-change leadership. In the former, the constituencies are viewed as part of the external environment of the organization and are managed as such. In social-change leadership, they are incorporated as a key actor of the work.”

The trick, some LCW award winners suggest, is to push for change while respecting local values and traditions, to fight against problems, not against people.

Robert Dostis and Joanne Heidkamp, leaders of the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger, understood that most Vermonters are proud of their resilience, resourcefulness, and independence — and their resistance to federal mandates. This largely rural state has a strong tradition of local decision-making. For example, in southwestern Vermont, one school district has nine schools and eight separate, elected school boards. By contrast, federal nutrition programs are usually designed to be cost-effective in cities with concentrated poverty, and managed through centralized decision-making.

Rather than try to change Vermonters, Dostis and Heidkamp devised a strategy based on local decision-making; they successfully campaigned to revive a dormant state regulation that required local community discussions about local application of the federal school



breakfast/lunch program. Through these community discussions, a new dialogue emerged in the state about the larger issue of hunger – a topic that previously had been ignored or downplayed by many public officials. As a result, 29 new school meal programs now feed 11,390 additional students in Vermont.

Collaborative leaders often make a clear distinction between traditional charity and the more long-term effort to weave a supportive community fabric. “Jewish Community Action does not serve. We develop partnerships,” says Vic Rosenthal, executive director of Jewish Community Action in St. Paul, Minnesota. He distinguishes between the traditions of public collective work toward *tzedek* (justice) and private individual acts of *tzedakah* (charity).

Although charity meets the recipient’s immediate needs and gives the volunteer instantaneous satisfaction, he notes that these effects do not last because they do not address root causes of poverty or racism.

“Such charity reinforces the power relationships between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’” he says. “I want to move the Jewish community from direct-service

volunteerism to effecting social change while affecting policy.” To do so, he reminds fellow Jews of their traditions of social activism, and he urges them to reflect on the paradox of their dual heritage — not only as subjects of virulent discrimination and anti-Semitism, but also as beneficiaries of privilege and assimilation.

“Only by working as a community in coalition with other, diverse communities — Christians, Moslems, African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans — can we build a social movement that will have the power to shift public priorities,” he says.

The Transformative Power of Leadership

Collaborative leadership, then, is less about *help* than about *transformation* — at the personal and community level. This kind of leadership is never easy; nor is it always efficient — at least, not in the sense that results come immediately.

“Just as a suspension bridge depends on the tension among its cables, trusses and beams, social-justice leadership relies on the tensions that arise around its commitment to democratic principles,” says NYU’s Ospina. “More traditional, hierarchical leadership is also complex, but does not usually address these same tensions. Hierarchical leadership may be able to make decisions faster, but we believe collaborative leadership, in many cases, is more effective over the long run — resulting in deeper, more lasting change, rooted in democracy.”



Malika Saada Saar and Imani Walker, leaders of The Rebecca Project for Human Rights, Washington, D.C., practice what they call “intersectional leadership.” To confront the lack of access to substance-abuse

treatment and the incarceration of untreated substance-abusing mothers, they lead Congressional staffers, White House domestic advisers, D.C. Family Court judges, and members of the D.C. City Council on monthly site visits to the Mental Health Center's family-treatment program.

These visits not only change policy-makers’ perceptions about the members of a community, but also change how the women in this program view themselves.

“The interactions between the lawmakers and mothers in recovery are always transformative,” says Saada Saar. Lawmakers listen to the real impact of legislation on the lives of parents who are struggling to stay clear of addiction and to raise their children. The mothers, who never envisioned themselves in the halls of Congress speaking to legislators, present the truth of their own experience. Through the Rebecca Project, they gain the advocacy skills and sense of self-worth to trust the gifts of their own thoughts, voices and spirits.

The question remains whether the leaders who combine collaboration with community self-reliance can keep their local roots and create a movement beyond their own programs. Juan Rosario emphasizes that collaborative leadership requires a larger, transformative vision. In his native Puerto Rico, he and his colleagues are creating a

broad, nonpartisan forum to exchange strategies and ideas, addressing sustainable-development issues.

"[Puerto Ricans] have to build a vision for our island, from the ground up," Rosario says. "In our country, this has been our pattern: we have let someone else define the vision; then we either adopt that vision or fight against it – and we don't define what we're for. We must take some time to think about the future; we must organize our heads, our vision, before we organize the people on the road. A strong opinion is a strong opinion, not a vision. Without a vision, strategies are useless."

Richard Louv is editorial adviser to the Leadership for a Changing World awards program. His seventh book about the American community, Last Child in the Woods, will be published in the spring of 2005. He can be reached at rlouv@cts.com

The 2004 Leadership for a Changing World Awardees

- Malika Saada Saar and Imani Walker, The Rebecca Project for Human Rights, Washington, D.C.
- Mily Treviño-Sauceda, Organización en California de Líderes Campesinas, Inc.—Pomona, CA
- Ron Chew, Wing Luke Asian Museum, Seattle, WA
- Carolyn Dowse, Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society — Sapelo Island, GA
- Pablo Alvarado, National Day Laborer Organizing Network — Los Angeles, CA
- Sandra K. Barnhill, Aid to Children of Imprisoned Mothers, Inc. —Atlanta, GA
- Hugh Espey, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement —Des Moines, IA
- Vic Rosenthal, Jewish Community Action, St. Paul, MN
- Robert Dostis and Joanne Heidkamp, Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger — Burlington, VT
- Anthony Flaccavento, Appalachian Sustainable Development — Abingdon, VA
- Jill Morrison, Powder River Basin Resource Council, Sheridan, WY
- Diana Bustamante, Rubén Núñez, and Mary Ann Benavidez, Colonias Development Council — Las Cruces, NM
- David Kakishiba, Isabel Toscano, Dung Thi Tran, Rosa Vicente, Lew Chien Saelee, Evangelina Lara, East Bay Asian Youth Center, Oakland, CA
- Greta Holmes, Alice Kim, Noreen McNulty, and Joan Parkin, Campaign to End the Death Penalty — Chicago, IL
- Juan E. Rosario, Misión Industrial de Puerto Rico, Inc. — San Juan, Puerto Rico
- Dázon Dixon Diallo, SisterLove, Inc.—Atlanta, GA
- Monifa Akinwole-Bandele, Pamela Sah and Sarah Ludwig, Neighborhood Economic Development Advocacy Project — New York, NY
- Beatrice Clark Shelby, Boys, Girls, Adults Community Development Center, Marvell, AR

If you would like to interview any of the other Leadership for a Changing World finalists or prior winners, please contact Deborah Walter at (908) 522-1677, or e-mail her at mediahits@comcast.net