

Still on Top: A Manager's Story

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He was a corporate leader in a big city, well known for his progressive views on corporate responsibility. Indeed, he had led the corporate community in efforts to achieve equity and engage neighborhoods.

In his latter days, he reflected on his efforts and their consequence. "You know, I've learned a lot about local communities over all these years. At first, we just ignored them although we did support the United Way and it had neighborhood concerns. Then, we began to get some pressure - advocacy groups and their demands. We responded by creating a foundation to give them money. And we developed some programs we thought would help them. Sometimes we combined our programs with those of other corporations and agencies in order to increase our impact. Then came this new idea that we could join with local groups and jointly produce good things."

"All this looked good and felt good. But truth be known, there doesn't seem to be much real neighborhood change. It just seems to me that local folks aren't really taking a significant responsibility for local change. We're still sitting on top, trying to figure out what to do so they can come to the top too.

While most institutional leaders would not describe their basic goal as enhancing neighborhood responsibility, this manager did. He said, "It's a question of power. I can take responsibility because I have power. I think lots of those neighborhood folks don't think they have power. And, while whatever we've done may have helped a little, it didn't really give them more power. I'm still on top but my power hasn't changed much in the neighborhood except for the jobs we provide."

Dear reader, *you* live in a neighborhood. What would you tell this powerful person about enabling powerful neighborhoods? What makes them powerful?

There are some neighborhood people, wise in the ways of their neighbors, who say that there are two necessities that combine to create power.

First is the skill, capacities and abilities to create something. It means we have the capacity to get things done.

Second is the authority to do our work. We have the right to decide and control how to do it.

And when we have the first two resources, a third capacity will emerge: responsibility. People take responsibility when they have capacity and authority because they are now invested with power.

So, if we understand this local wisdom, we are prepared to respond to the powerful man on top. The responsibility he seeks depends on our local capacity and authority. The two questions we can ask him are:

1) What are you and your institutional allies doing that limits or degrades local capacity and authority? Stop doing that.

2) What do you and your allies do or could do to support local capacity and authority? Do that.*

*For some possible institutional actions to enable powerful neighborhoods see Learnings 7, 8, 9, 13, 20, 21, 24 and 25 on John McKnight's website at johnmcknight.org