

KEYS TO URBAN VICTORY

The Houston polis is fifty miles wide and thirty miles long and coincides with what is generally acknowledged to be the metropolitan area of Houston. Approximately two million people live in the polis.

A team of House and Metro people are assigned to the Houston polis and it is their responsibility. It is the Xavier principle. That polis is their whole world and thus, they have been able to plow into this one polis and do the job.

At this point one Town Meeting has been held in the Houston Polis and six Town Meetings are scheduled. Thirteen Town Meetings are being activated locally; this is, a core or troika has begun work. In thirteen more places there is definite local interest in Town Meetings which is building toward a core or steering committee. An initial step has been made in eleven more places targeted for Town Meeting. That accounts for forty-four Town Meetings either scheduled or "targeted" in the Houston Polis. According to our phasing model we had one Town Meeting in January. Two are scheduled in March, five in April, sixteen in May and twenty or more in June. That kind of momentum building is our model.

In terms of a broad network we have been working with a wide variety of individuals and groups across the city. This network has webbed the urban complexity of our particular metropolitan area. In addition to working with local neighborhood community committees and activities, something called the "Houston Committee for Town Meeting '76" has been particularly helpful. At this point approximately sixty people are working on it. The committee includes three different Chambers of Commerce, Texas Medical Center (which is one of the largest employers in Houston), Exxon Corporation, Shell Corporation, International Union of Operating Engineers, the Houston Independent School District, University of Houston, Texas Southern University, Urban League, Jaycees, Kiwanis, civic clubs, civic associations, churches, Houston Metropolitan Ministries, Vista Program, two Mayors, several Bicentennial Commissions, community development commissioners, librarians and so forth.

Maybe one more thing to say at the beginning is that the "Messiah of Town Meeting" (an endorsement by the State Bicentennial Commission) has never happened in Texas. On February first, two weeks after our first Town Meeting we received the endorsement of the Houston Bicentennial Commission, but that has been an almost insignificant factor, in moving on that city. Nobody cares. When it happened, we were glad that it happened, but if it had not happened it would not have altered anything at all.

Those are the statistics. Now I want to talk about the ten things we have learned about working in a major city or in an urban situation. I will tell a few stories to illustrate these ten points. I have never had a harder assignment than trying to boil down this maze of experience into something that can be talked about with some rationality. First of all, we have learned that the key is intensive grassroots work; that is, working neighborhood by neighborhood, community by community across the metropolitan area. It started with Foray 21-6 when we sent teams into the six micros of the polis to discern the neighborhoods by using our intuitions and to fan every single spark that was the least bit available. Fanning every spark has been a key. No spark was too dead not to receive a little bit of fanning

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in hopes that it might break into a flame which might become a Town Meeting. The sparks were old colleagues or "casual contacts". Any person who had a little bit of interest was a spark worthy of fanning. One great story is about a galaxy pastor who was active when the galaxies first started. Because of misunderstandings with his church he finally retired from the galaxy and then from the Movement in order to preserve his salary. We called on him one Saturday morning. We just fanned that old dead spark a little bit, and now he has a Steering Committee of approximately twenty people and a date set for a Town Meeting in May. He has become a kind of hero in his local community. We learned to fan any spark we could find.

The second thing we have learned is that you need the assistance of a comprehensive advisory body. We have called it a Committee, but it is not a formal committee. It is an informal gathering of people. We have brought the committee together to seek advice from them. They are glad to assist us. They helped us look at the places where interest for Town Meeting was already present. Then they advised us on the other key target communities needed to really win in Houston. They suggested key people that we needed to meet. We have done that. The advisory committee was developed from a comprehensive frame of the different dynamics that go on in society and it was kept comprehensive. Now there is no magic in having a group like that. A group like that is not going to do Town Meeting for you. But they can be a good check point. They can give a lot of good advice. As it has turned out, I would say that at least two-thirds, if not three-quarters, of the people who are on that committee are now actually involved in some local steering committee. Any advisory body will die unless its members as individuals are involved in creating steering committees within their own neighborhoods.

The third thing we have learned is to follow every lead. Any name or any lead that somebody stumbles on is significant. You pick it up and follow it. You never know where it is going to lead. A man who works for the Exxon Corporation visited Fifth City about five years ago and has never forgotten the experience. He was just a "lead". We had been in touch with him a little bit during the past year. He introduced us to a co-worker who said, "You need to see a man who works at the University of Houston." We went to see him. He not only works at the University but is also a member of the Jaycees in one of the suburbs. There is now a Town Meeting scheduled in that suburb. Then he suggested we contact Texas Southern University, the black university next door to the University of Houston. There we met the Dean of the School of Public Affairs, who introduced us to a professor who is now the Town Meeting Chairman for Texas State University. That led to a group of seven university interns who will be working with the Town Meeting program. In following leads, one contact leads to another that catalyzes new possibilities. Another good lead, an Episcopalian priest who has been somewhat related to the Movement over the years, introduced me to a union leader. The union leader got very interested. He went ahead and set up a luncheon with one of the suburban mayors. Now we have a Town Meeting scheduled in that town under the sponsorship of the Mayor. You never know where the next lead is going to lead, so you take everyone and follow it.

The fourth thing we have learned is to be a bold mysterious presence. Nobody knows who the ICA is. They don't even ask very much. Our presence and our deeds are our credentials.

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One way that has worked out is in just continually calling people. Every name we get we call. It takes a bit of courage sometimes to sit there and lift the telephone receiver when we do not know what we are going to encounter on the other end of the line, but we just go ahead and call. There is a bit of adventure in it! You have to see it as an adventure or you get frozen or paralyzed. What you are really doing in this great adventure is seeking out "those who care." You are looking for those who have already made the deep decision that they care for their neighbor. When you make all those phone calls and follow all the leads, as the one who represents the Mystery, you discover you are looking for others who have been touched by the Mystery and you begin to locate and build the network of "Those Who Care" across the city.

The fifth thing we have learned is that we had to build an image of momentum very carefully across the whole city. We treat the whole city as one great sociological entity and keep working so that people have the image, "something is building in this city!" There is something going on!" When we had the Houston Committee Meetings we were always very careful that the next meeting had more people than the last meeting. The next meeting had a few more groups represented than the last meeting. The current report always indicated more Town Meetings in the chute than the previous report. We were always carefully building the momentum and the image that a new kind of urban coalition was coming into being based on community care or community development. That makes it possible for very strange bedfellows to get together and work together. Some of the key people in our work are card-carrying Republicans who are heading up President Ford's re-election campaign and sitting right next to them in the Committee Meeting is somebody who has been considered an "Alinsky radical" for the last ten years. Yet the coalition is there because it focuses on neighborhood care or community development. There is commonality!

The sixth thing we have learned is that it is very important to "scheme" for success, quality, and impact. You do not let anything happen without scheming, scheming, scheming for those three particular values. One of those examples is our first Town Meeting. Our first Town Meeting did not catalyze forty Town Meetings, but it was a very helpful tool in intensifying what was already happening and catalyzing some other Town Meetings. We understood that the one Town Meeting in January had to be a quality Town Meeting. So we finally just closed down everything else in the House and made sure that Town Meeting came off. We decided that the document produced at that Town Meeting had to be beautiful. We made sure that it was. It is a document that you would be glad to show anybody. We made sure that when the newspaper reporter showed up at the meeting doing her research for the article that everybody with whom she talked had the right story. As a result, the article that appeared in the newspaper a week after the Town Meeting was a very helpful article. Another example of scheming: there are two meetings already scheduled in March. One is in a suburban middle-class neighborhood, and the other was a shimmering possibility in a small black rural community within the boundaries of Houston. We went to the people in that rural community who were interested. They happened to be a part of a Vista program. We said, "Let us take you into our confidence. We need your Town Meeting on the same day as this white suburban neighborhood so that Houston gets the image that Town Meeting is for everyone." They quickly got their people together and said "All right, we will do it."

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So in March we are having Town Meetings in two diametrically opposite communities in order that the impact on the city will be a kind of "one, two blow" on the same day.

Then seventhly, we have learned to keep a check on comprehensiveness. In terms of geography, you want to see that Town Meetings are taking place systematically across the urban area. At this point our grid only goes to the micro level. But we are making sure that Town Meetings show up evenly spread across the geography. Comprehensiveness also has to do with the types of communities impacted. Different kinds of sociological communities are being dealt with, i.e. both wealthy and poor neighborhoods. We are also dealing with all the major ethnic groups in the city. In our case we have to make sure that we have Town Meetings in the Mexican American, Black and Anglo communities.

The eighth thing we have learned is that you create a transrational plan. If your urban plan is only rational it stifles the spontaneity or creativity that is going to break it loose. But if you rely only on creativity you have no way of handling the breakthroughs. It is the dialogue or tension between utter spontaneity, wherever it breaks loose on one hand, and a rational plan and grid on the other hand, that holds your value screen together. The transrationality of both time and geography brings order to the spontaneity and indicates where you have to start something cooking. It was not until we had had five months of hard activity at the grassroots level that we sat down and did a phase chart that held Town Meeting both geographically and chronologically in a rational pattern. But by then we knew what we were doing. Now we have a phase chart that tells us how to capture that spontaneity and give it power.

Ninthly, we have learned that you move slowly in approaching top power figures. We have stayed away from them until someone else was in a position to approach them and say, "Now Town Meeting is something you need to know about. We want to introduce you to it." In Houston there are really only four power figures: the President and Executive Manager of the Chamber of Commerce, the Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, a County Judge, and the Mayor of the city. In one case it happened that the first Town Meeting was held in his neighborhood. One of his neighbors, a galaxy pastor, came and told him about Town Meeting and got him involved in it. A few weeks later, we actually talked to him in his office. Now we have the backing of the Chamber of Commerce. They are beginning to develop a downtown Town Meeting. In the case of the School Official, we had been working with some of his community education people in various schools. Then one of those contacts provided the entry. We talked with the District Superintendent and now we are working with the whole school district through the Area Superintendents. One of the Judge's neighbors went in to see him. He has given his endorsement. We have not been to see him yet, but he wants us to work with Town Meetings across the county. We have not made contact with the Mayor yet. We are still waiting. We are not going to knock on his door and demand to be seen because we don't want to go in and see him under those circumstances. We are waiting for his office to call us and invite us to talk with him. That will happen. It is just a matter of time. The thing we have learned is to proceed quietly.

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Finally, we have learned that you do anything necessary to keep control of the next step. That is both in terms of our total strategy and the strategy within a particular Town Meeting. We are the ones that are doing Town Meeting. We are getting a lot of assistance from a lot of people, but the ball is still in our hands and always will be. We are the ones that are out to impact society with this particular tool. Therefore, we scheme so that the next step in relationship to any strategy we are doing is our step. Even if it means calling somebody up and reminding them what they are going to do. But we keep the initiative in every situation. How many Town Meetings can be controlled or monitored at any given time? or How many can we really keep in touch with? I have decided that, at least in the urban situation, although this may not be true on the regional basis, a good consultant can actively work with and monitor fifteen Town Meetings at one time. I am not sure that is the limit. It may be closer to twenty or twenty-five, but it is at least fifteen. Even an area prior can do that, if he wants to. Even with all the other things that he has to worry about, he can monitor fifteen Town Meetings. That is crucial with the kind of intensity that our urban situation demands. Then we can turn loose the large number of Town Meetings needed across the whole urban area.

One other hidden factor that has been important to us is that it is crucial to have at least the faint glimmerings of a long range vision of what Town Meetings are going to do for our cities which is Primal Community Experiment. It means that if we can accomplish something like having "wall-to-wall Town Meetings," in the relatively restricted time of one year, that there will have to be something like a citywide consult. It will set up the support and training structures that allow communities to come alive, to stay alive, and to embark upon the process that we call rebuilding primal community. It is that kind of long-range vision that allows us to do the day-to-day tactics that are necessary to have Town Meetings happen in one urban area.