

# COMMUNITY RADIO SHOW

“Community Strengthening & Foundations”

Community Radio Show Text

Recorded: 15 August 2007

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Guest: Michael Marcus (Michael)

Brought to you by The Leadership Practice, the Community Strengthening Training & Technical Assistance Provider for the Corporation for National & Community Service

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**TODD:** For the first half of our show or so, Michael Marcus, a grant-maker with over 25 years of experience, shows us how using a community strengthening lens influences your understanding of the foundation grant making world, the etiquette of approaching grant-makers, and proposal construction.

First, though, to eliminate background noise, use your 'mute' or 'mic' button so that you can continue to hear today's speaker. If these are not working, you can also press \*6 on your phone during the call to mute your phone. You press \*6 again to un-mute your phone. If there is an emergency, feel free to hang up and then call back in.

Michael, welcome to the show.

**TODD:** Michael, why do you enjoy giving away money?

**MICHAEL:** A wonderful question! I'm not sure there's anyone who doesn't enjoy giving away money, but the most important reason is that, if done well, it can result in a significant step forward for the organizations I work with.

**TODD:** Can you give us an example of a step forward?

**MICHAEL:** I made two large grants to a Suburban Area Agency on Aging in Cook County and another was to the Chicago Area Agency on Aging. The reason there were two grants were two different yet adjoining organizations. We were trying two different methods of getting older adults to enroll in benefits programs. One we use staff of the agency and one we used volunteers as the main worker. In one year, they were able to enroll 80,000 people over the age of 65 in programs designed for low to moderate income older adults. Netted a billion dollars in extra benefits per year for those people. No way you can beat that kind of grant making. That was about a million dollar of investment that got about a billion dollars back. That's one of my favorites.

**TODD:** What about that example is community strengthening based?

**MICHAEL:** It certainly strengthened the community because it was sending volunteers into the community to help older adults.

**TODD:** It's not just about what we might think of as the outcome only, but also the process.

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**MICHAEL:** It was totally the process. It was older adults going into the community to talk to older adults.

**TODD:** What about that kind of great experience with grant making do you wish people asking for money would emulate?

**MICHAEL:** Be aware of the assets that around you. Use the assets available to strengthen the community. Another example, which happens to be an older adult one, we set up a fund along with a couple of other foundations and nonprofits to fund nonprofit organizations to develop assisted living facilities. The local organizations were the people on the ground which made it possible for those organizations to learn the skills needed to build the facilities. The result of the couple of million dollars was 5000 units available to poor older people to live in—and the building was all done by local organizations. Nobody swept in from outside the community and decided what was going to be done. In another instance, through funding to a public housing development near Midway Airport near Chicago, the tenant association could develop a coop and thus purchase the buildings they lived in. They were able to develop services such as job placement that were by the community for the community.

**TODD:** It sounds like there's an underlying belief structure regarding communities controlling their own fates. Can you talk about that?

**MICHAEL:** That's the essence of an asset based approach. What we don't want is large mega-corporations telling communities how to operate. Success is measured by the ability of people to feeling empowered. Thus, it is good for communities to control their own physical spaces.

**TODD:** You mentioned success being measured. That's a hard thing to do, as we all know. Other than a qualitative good feeling what metrics have you used?

**MICHAEL:** For example, the number of people with appropriate housing who didn't have it before.

**TODD:** So, what I'm hearing is that communities are best suited to supply themselves with appropriate housing?

**MICHAEL:** Yes.

**TODD:** Can you talk about that?

**MICHAEL:** One of the great tenants on aging is that older adults do better if they can continue to live and shop in the neighborhood the have known for a long time. If someone comes in from the outside, the older adults will be displaced.

**TODD:** There's a correlation then between how much power a group of local citizens has and the appropriateness of a proposed solution?

**MICHAEL:** Absolutely. I've always thought that. People from the outside can do something important, but we see over and over again examples of how the community itself is able to hit more specifically on that mark the kinds of things people want and need in those communities. That's why local people advise recreation centers because they know what kind of programming is best for the area.

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**TODD:** So we're not discounting contributions from outside the community, but we are pointing out that the abilities of local people are often discounted in projects that people propose for funding.

**MICHAEL:** That is correct.

**TODD:** So, what can people who are on the show today do differently when it comes to seeking funds?

**MICHAEL:** One of the things people can always do is talk about how they are connected to the community itself. In order to impress a funder, people often list bigwigs who are impressive names but are not necessarily members of the community that will be affected by the project. How will the community contribute?

**TODD:** What I'm hearing then is that if a proposed project seems that it's an outsider trying to fix a community, regardless of good intentions, that the project will not seem viable to you?

**MICHAEL:** Right.

**TODD:** I'm also sensing that it's not just the content of a proposal that affects the outcome, but also the attitude of the people constructing it?

**MICHAEL:** Absolutely. If I walk into a place that full of a lot of experts and no local residents, I wonder what's going on. This also affects the general etiquette of approaching a program officer. Things like always tells the truth or acknowledge what you may or may not be doing effectively. Also, if I go to a site visit and I'm inundated with star volunteers and staff members but see no people really affected by the project, I will doubt the efficacy of the project. This is true even if it's a state- or city-wide project. Someone there should really be able to answer "How does this project build community power?" Too many times the gathered staff and volunteers can only talk about the services. Being transparent, though, does not mean having a very needy recipient of service there to tell me that he or she is reliant on your service. That person should be saying how your service allows him or her to grow.

**TODD:** Michael, can you share with us then a list of ways to successfully construct a proposal that is community strengthening based and follows what we've been talking about today?

**MICHAEL:**

1. First, before any project proposal is set in stone, the people applying for money should conduct asset-based questionnaires in the community. I'll have Todd Email an example out after. These questionnaires are designed to one, to collect asset data such as who has what gifts that will be involved in the project and two, to create a community conversation which results in choosing direction for community projects that are deemed most beneficial. These questionnaires are a necessary beginning way to determine how power most effectively works for the community's benefit.
2. Hand in hand with this, this means that individuals or agencies approaching grant makers must be open to the idea that there should be true partnership with the community in the project. This means that the community is involved and gains strength from the project. For example, say you want to open a house that helps adolescent women who have been court adjudicated. Everyone knows that you don't just plop that house in the middle of the neighborhood. Everyone knows you go around asking questions. This is a very minimal standard, though. It should go to the

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level of asking residents “What can you do to contribute to the success of these women in this community? What can these women do to contribute to the success?”

3. Thirdly, this is when you can actually really write the proposal. Using the example of adolescent women, I think a proposal is extraordinarily stronger if it includes not just asking local residents about the proposed house, but also how local residents will be actively involved.
4. Fourthly, along with the third step, is to make sure the construction of the proposal is influenced by community strengthening ideals. For example, in what has traditionally been known as the needs statement section, think of this part as the “why” section instead and relate how the community will be strengthened instead of fixed.
5. Fifthly, after you’ve submitted the proposal, always make sure there is follow up if the foundation requires additional information. Should you be fortunate enough to be moved to the next phase and an officer is doing the due diligence to the board, there should be a site visit. As we talked about earlier, this site visit should be designed to be community strengthening based.
6. Finally, once you receive the grant, make sure the mechanisms and evaluations are in place to actually engage community strengthening.

**TODD:** Thank you, Michael. We’re going to go to audience questions now. Because we have limited time, please focus on asking Michael questions about today’s topic rather than sharing best practice and stories. Remember, if you have a question for Michael state your name, organization, and location.

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This text serves as a reference for the Community Radio Show but it does not serve as an official transcript of the recording.