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Generation Next: A new way forward for community leadership

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 29 May, 2012

Presentation by

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Damian Ogden:

Good afternoon everyone. First of all thank you for the invitation to come today. It really is an honour to be here, particularly because I'm amongst people who have dedicated both their professional and personal lives to community development.

Today I'm going to talk about Campaign Action, the organisation that I founded in 2010. But I'm also going to talk a bit about the Obama Campaign.

It's funny, whenever I talk about Campaign Action people say, "That's really great but I really want to know about the Obama campaign," even four years later so I might just get that out of the way to start with.

So back in 2004, my wife had been trawling through the internet. She sent me an email and said, "You need to look at this speech that was just given in the United States at the DNC National Convention by this guy called Barack Obama."

It's almost kind of weird to think that it was only that far ago that we didn't even know who he was; we didn't even know his name.

Like most emails, I didn't really read it. Six months later I finally got around to watching the speech. I must say that it was a speech that really captivated me for a number of reasons. I'd been working in politics for a while. I'm involved in politics for no other reason than I believe in social change. If there was another way to do it, then I would do that.

I'd been pretty frustrated with the political process in 2004 and I was a little bit despondent about it. I think that's why my wife forwarded the video to me.

So I watched the speech and I remember thinking to myself, if he ever runs for President then I want to be involved in that campaign. So I kept the link and I continually watched what was happening over the course of time from 2004 until he was the nominee in 2006.

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So I ended up working on the Obama campaign. It was a fantastic experience for a number of reasons. I was able to work in the national headquarters in Chicago and I worked in 12 states across the country for three months.

It was without a doubt the hardest work that I have ever done. I door-knocked over 25,000 doors, I made over 5000 phone calls. It wasn't always a great experience.

But in the last two weeks of the campaign, as I said, I was in the national headquarters in Chicago. Chicago, Illinois being Barack Obama's home state, was easily won. It wasn't in play.

But a lot of the effort was being put into north-west Indiana, which is about 40 minutes from Chicago. It was a must-win state. If they didn't win north-west Indiana then they probably wouldn't win the election. They hadn't won it since 1964.

So for the last month of the campaign I was making the trip from Chicago to north-west Indiana to do all that door knocking in bitter cold in some very rough neighbourhoods. They're areas that had been really forgotten about for the last 30 years.

Michael Jackson actually comes from a district called Gary, Indiana, which is where I was campaigning. No joke, in the middle of the town there is a sign saying, "Jackson Five playing tonight." The theatre had closed down and nothing had replaced it. And it wasn't there for any sentimental reason. It was actually quite sad.

But I ended up campaigning with a gentleman by the name of Dwight. Dwight was 64, an African American. He was a janitor. He gets paid about \$16,000 a year.

Dwight had never voted in an election in his entire life. But Dwight, for a number of reasons, many similar to me, had become a volunteer on that campaign. He started in the primary and by the general election he was making the trip from his home state in Illinois to north-west Indiana to door-knock and coordinate the efforts to win that state.

In the end, Dwight was coordinating over 600 volunteers for six months every weekend, going in, door-knocking, talking to people about the campaign.

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So they won Indiana. It was the first time since 1964. It might be even tougher to win it this time and I don't think they will.

Dwight was someone who was completely disengaged from the political process his entire life, but he became a real leader in that campaign. He was so central to that campaign I don't think they would have won those two districts without Dwight.

So that was a transformative experience working on that campaign. I came home on a bit of a high, completely physically wrecked from it. I kept in contact with Dwight. I found out that Dwight had then been elected to leadership positions within his union.

The mid-term elections in 2010 were very tough for progressives and Dwight was elected to Chicago City Council. Chicago City Council is a huge council. It has massive power in Chicago. And if you know anything about American politics, you know that Chicago politics is pretty rough.

So Dwight was elected as a city councillor. And now he makes decisions, because that council has so much power, about what happens with local cleaning contracts in his city.

So that campaign really changed the way that I felt about politics and the way that I felt about social change. I understood it from the theoretical point of view but it really did change the way that I felt about it.

So I had this lingering connection to the campaign. And while I thought that I went there to learn skills and techniques about winning, what I came back with was a real determination to create an organisation that would engage individuals and teach organisations how to campaign more effectively and to win their issues through grassroots campaigning.

Since Campaign Action was founded in November 2010, we've trained over 1400 people. They have been community activists, heads of organisations and everyday people who are trying to achieve social change.

We've been doing that work constantly since then and it was really because of my experience on that campaign that changed something inside of me.

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I really believe that the best thing about politics is that it's about democratising information, it's about giving people the skills and ability to do it for themselves. Unfortunately, in politics, it's been too much about the knowledge, the skills being wrested within the few. What you do by democratising information is you actually share it.

What does that do? That diffuses power, which some people feel very uncomfortable about.

Do I have to mention Joan Kirner three times to be invited back?

So back to Campaign Action – these are some of our graduates in the Northern Territory in February earlier this year. We trained activists in Darwin and then went to Alice Springs to train Indigenous candidates who are running for the upcoming state election there.

A lot of the political discourse nationally at the moment is about mining, so I thought I'd put up a picture of mining there just to keep myself relevant.

In our political campaign, there are three major resources: time, people and money. Campaigns require a lot of strategic thought, and I'm not just talking about political campaigns here, I'm also talking about the issue-based campaigns that you probably run with your organisations. Really, you need to think a lot about how are they going to use those three resources: time people and money.

Those resources are not infinite, so at the end of a campaign people usually feel drained because resources have been drained from the community in order to reach a victory and nothing has been left behind. Nothing has been left to empower the community to hold leaders accountable.

So the reason that I've got a picture of a mine up there is because I believe that campaigning is traditionally done in a way that I call "electoral strip mining". The campaign comes into a community, strips out the votes and leaves nothing after the election, nothing but waste and hard feelings.

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So at Campaign Action, we urge people to think proactively about running campaigns that build the base, a progressive base, empower communities, grow new leaders like Dwight, and give them the skills they need to do this independently in the future.

So how do we create social change? It was great that you had that panel just before I came on because you were talking about achieving agenda reform, or change. As I said, the reason I'm involved in politics is because I believe in social change and I want to achieve social change, not for any other reason.

We love shapes at Campaign Action. Our favourite is the triangle, for no other reason but it's got three points.

The first is community organising. It's a term that's used a lot. Barack Obama was probably the most famous community organiser. They talked a lot about that. But what does community organising really mean?

Community organising is really about a constituency that is fighting for change, a group of people that are constantly moving the agenda forward, building that base.

The second element that is just as important is progressive public policy, providing a vision, direction and agenda. You actually have to have an agenda.

The third element is grassroots electoral campaigning. That's really about getting your agenda up through legislation and through the parliament.

This seems pretty obvious but what I would argue is what happens in politics is that we get too focused on one or the other and not all three.

Community organising is done without any connection to electoral politics, which makes it a marginal politics. What's the point of organising a constituency of people who are fighting for change if you actually can't do it through legislation or you don't get your change through the parliament? There are a lot of great ideas out there but what's a great idea if it's never implemented?

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And this is the area where I'm really pushing back on – electoral campaigning: politics for politics sake. What's the point of winning election after election if you're actually not implementing a progressive agenda or bringing people with you?

So all three of those are connected. Not one is more important than the other.

But every point must also focus on developing new leaders. Campaigns are an opportunity for new people to become involved and become engaged in the process. But this also strengthens organisations. Through grassroots community organising, it's not only a way to win but it's also a way to strengthen organisations from the ground up. We know this instinctively. We know this is the way that this works.

So the way conventional political models for creating social change work is that there's an election. We don't know when the federal election but we know it's roughly sometime next year. We'll engage around election time to get our agenda up. So that's the mobilising. That's the electoral strip mining. It happens when elections are on, not too far out from an election, maybe a month out.

That really drains resources and tires people out. It's also a very cynical exercise as well. How many times have you heard, "This is the most important election of our time"? They said that in 2006, they said it in 2010. They probably will say it again.

And we wonder why people are cynical of the political process. We wonder why they are disengaged. But there is an alternate model and this is the model that we promote.

We talk about empowering communities for lasting social change and it's what we call, "how do you build a social movement?"

Grassroots organising is ongoing. It doesn't stop. It's what you do in between the times when decisions are being made at election time. It's about building the capacity, the commitment, the infrastructure around a compelling, coherent vision for change. That's the organising work.

Barack Obama didn't win just because he was a once-in-a-generation candidate. There had been other candidates that were probably equally as good as him. He was a great orator. But

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what he had was a movement that had been put together over the course of 10 years. He really benefitted from a lot of work that had been done in some very disenfranchised communities across the country back in 2000.

The grassroots organising is the hard work. It's the 90% under the surface of the iceberg that you don't see. But when you come to an election time, and it's about mobilising, and that's the 10% that you see, that's where you get lasting social change, because it strengthens organisations and it holds them to account after elections are finished.

The biggest failure of the Obama campaign – I'm not devoid of being a critic of it – is that during the campaign, a very well-funded campaign, a lot of money was set aside for an initiative that they called Organising for America. So the idea was that once he was elected he was going to move in with some pretty hard legislative reform, first of which was healthcare. Even though he came in the wave of that election, it was still going to be very tough.

But I would say that the campaign went from, "Yes we can," to "Yes I can," and then people said, "No you didn't." Because after the campaign, instead of taking the base and the people that they had organised and trained and developed into new leaders, they asked them to sort of stay out of it. They actually didn't say that but they let them stay inactive for six months, and then when things started to get really tough and he needed his base, they wondered why they couldn't mobilise them anymore.

This is ongoing work and it never ends.

So what this really comes down to is leadership development. Campaign Action, we're a training organisation. We don't run campaigns for organisations. There are a lot of people out there who say they do that and they'll come in and they'll write a strategy. I actually think that completely misses the point and it's not the reason why I'm in politics. It's really about thinking about the long haul – how do we build today to turn the tide in two, three, four years down the road? What are we doing today that always moves the ball forward?

So I urge you to think proactively about running campaigns that build the base, empower communities, grow new leaders and give them the skills they need to do this independently in the future.

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Leaders are not born. They are groomed and mentored. Leadership skills can be learned but self-appointed leaders are rarely the leaders that we want, for they see self-interest as their interest and power, not relationally to the greater good of the group, community, organisation.

We must develop new leaders who advocate for social change and in doing so broaden our progressive base to engage those from underrepresented communities.

Now, when I talk about new leaders I'm not necessarily talking about young leaders. Dwight, as I said, was 64. He always had leadership potential but it had never been discovered. But that campaign gave him the ability to shine.

So what we're talking about here is a people-centred values-based politics. It's a politics that recruits authentic leaders that have in a relationship and are accountable to communities and a politics that runs effective people-powered community-centred campaigns that build power for those communities.

This is the opposite model of corporate-funded campaigns. These are the campaigns that we call the ones that we can truly believe in to help make change happen.

People-centred grassroots campaigns are when the largest group of people participate in the political process and exercise their power. This requires politicians and leaders to engage with the community beyond a short term transactional relationship at election time.

Elections are not all just about media, money and mobilising supporters for a week. It's the product and strength of a political movement.

Political campaigning, while extremely important in its own right, is largely a vehicle for getting people involved in political movements in the first place. When powerful enough, those progressive movements can win election after election and move the progressive agenda forward.

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It's really not a new concept, what I'm talking about. We call this "grassroots politics". Our greatest resource as a progressive movement has been the ability to mobilise a committed volunteer base.

So, to come back to the point that I started on, what that it really is about is my connection to that campaign and the story of Dwight, someone who was completely disenfranchised by the political process, but was always a leader with potential, even at the age of 64, a janitor, someone who was not considered politically important.

We have many in our community like Dwight and we need to identify them, we need to train them, we need to give them skills as leaders because they are people with real connections to their community.

Thank you.

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