



COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION CENTER

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UNDERSTANDING NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION STRATEGIES

- Three Major Strategies
- Three Support Strategies
- Looking at the Neighborhood
as a System
- Ten Difficult Decisions for
Neighborhood Leaders

*Where there is no vision and no trust,
Everything defaults to politics, power and even paranoia.*

by: Robert Porter Lynch, 1977

No matter how sophisticated the leadership, neighborhood revitalization is a difficult and complex process stretching to the limit -- the time, energy, and imagination -- of all those involved.

While there are no shortcuts to revitalization -- it takes a few years regardless of the abilities of the community -- there are a number of ways to avoid some of the mistakes of others. This article is intended to serve as a guide to looking at the "big picture" to help those just beginning revitalization to focus their efforts by gaining better knowledge and understanding of the strategic planning process.

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WHAT ISA "STRATEGY?"

First, it's important to understand the idea behind the term "strategy."

A strategy is a systematic approach to solving a complex problem.¹

A "systematic approach" means that neighborhood leaders should spend sufficient time diagnosing the problem, understanding all its dimensions, and then building a series of programs, each of which is designed to address some portion of the problem.

Unfortunately, most people jump to developing solutions before they really understand all the underlying causes of the problem and consequently overlook important aspects of the problem that would result in devising the most effective solutions.

THREE MAJOR STRATEGIES

If you are going to begin a revitalization project, you should be able to boil the process down to its basic parts. Nearly every revitalization project in this country has as its major thrust at least one of these three goals that build a new future:

- A) Revitalization of the Neighborhood Business District.
- B) Improvement of the Neighborhood Housing Stock.
- C) Creation of New Jobs for Neighborhood Residents.

These three issues are fundamental because they result in providing people with the means to have greater ownership in some portion of their neighborhood.²

Inevitably your project will focus on some variation of these three themes.

¹ Strategy is the pathway forward that attains the 'vision' of the organization, achieves the "value" to which the vision aspires, and produces an advantage over either the competition or the current condition for those served by the strategy.

² Ultimately, these are the visible, tangible results. More importantly, these become part of a change in attitudes, perceptions, and the culture of the community. See "Things to Know Before Beginning Neighborhood Revitalization by Robert Porter Lynch.

SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Regardless of what major strategies you decide upon, there will be several other support strategies that will be critical to solving your major goal. Typically the support strategies are necessary for success, but they are not the ultimate goals.

Some basic support strategies are:

- A) Human/Municipal Services, such as day-care, improved education, better transportation, trash collection, etc.
- B) Image Building, such as arts or cultural programs, historic preservation, ethnic awareness, etc.
- C) Crime Prevention, such as the establishment of better lighting, neighborhood anti-crime patrols, neighborhood alert programs, etc.
- D) Citizen Participation, such as intensive block club organizing, revitalization commissions, community operated revitalization/development corporations, etc.

These four are support strategies because, while they substantially improve the neighborhood's quality of life and remove critical barriers to revitalization, they do not result in concrete, measurable ownership of the neighborhood by the residents.

Although the first three support strategies are often desirable in a neighborhood, the last -- citizen participation -- is absolutely essential to all revitalization projects. It is the heart and blood of every successful revitalization effort. Without citizen participation the effort will lose its spirit and become directionless.

LOOKING AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD AS A SYSTEM

Successful execution of both the major and the support strategies will require a basic understanding of how your neighborhood functions.

If you think of the neighborhood as a complex, living organism or "system," you can better understand how any revitalization strategy must impact on all parts of the neighborhood's systems before it can have a permanent, long-term impact.

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Basically, there are five "systems" in a neighborhood that have a major impact on the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and actions of people toward themselves and toward their community:

- 1) Educational Organizations, including schools, learning centers, libraries, etc.
- 2) Community Organizations including the revitalization organizations, churches, social clubs, business groups, etc.
- 3) Political structures composed of decision-makers that have legal authority to determine the fate of the neighborhood, including elected officials as well as city staff.
- 4) Economic systems that make it financially worthwhile (or worthless) to reinvest in the neighborhood.
- 5) Environmental systems, particularly the physical elements of the neighborhood, such as houses, buildings, roads, trees, etc.

It is critical to understand that successful revitalization strategies usually have a strong impact on all of these five neighborhood systems. Programs that impact only one or two of these systems usually fail, because they do not significantly alter the way the neighborhood functions.

Of the five systems, by far the most important one is the first - the attitudinal system - because if you can't change the way people think about their neighborhood, if you can't make them begin to see their triple-decker houses as potentially attractive buildings, if you can't get people to appreciate the ethnic character of the neighborhood, then all the work you do towards revitalization will be just an empty victory.

10 DIFFICULT DECISIONS FOR NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERS

There is simply no way to make a neighborhood revitalization project anything less than hard work. Every leader will be faced with a number of difficult problems, and the way these problems are handled will spell the difference between the success or failure of the effort. The following pages summarize some of the more perplexing problems and issues you will have to face during the revitalization.

1) Where do we start?

Most people want to begin a revitalization by tackling the thorniest, most troublesome problem in the neighborhood, such as an excessively high crime rate, or a business district that became extinct ten years ago.

Generally these issues lead to failure because they are too complex, too expensive, and require too much time. They should be addressed later in the revitalization.

It is better to start with an issue that everyone can agree on that can be quickly solved (i.e. in a few months), that will result in some physical change, (i.e. a park, a cleanup campaign, etc.), and that will mobilize the energies of a large number of people.

The particular project chosen will be different in every neighborhood, depending upon its problems, potentials, and personalities. However, it is most important to choose an issue that will result in success, because this will give your group the momentum to tackle more difficult problems.

2) They did it in Baltimore!

Many people become excited about neighborhood revitalization because they meet someone who has been involved in revitalization somewhere else or read about a project in some other city. All too often people say something like: "Great! look what they did in Baltimore. We should do that here!"

Unfortunately this approach often ends up in failure, because solutions designed specifically to solve Baltimore's problems don't always work in other cities.

Before jumping into a ready-made solution, examine your neighborhood carefully, understand its strengths and weaknesses, and examine a variety of strategies other cities have used, then tailor a solution to your particular conditions, and don't be afraid to innovate.

3) Who's Responsible Here?

There has been a lot of talk about who is responsible for revitalizing neighborhoods. Some people maintain the federal government is responsible, others place the burden on city government. This is a mistake.

The neighborhood itself is the only group responsible for revitalization, because only the neighborhood can have any significant long-term control over its own destiny. City officials don't revitalize neighborhoods, they can only support the efforts of local residents and businessmen. Revitalization is a self-help process, not a welfare program. The city government may be responsible for providing adequate services to the neighborhood -- police protection, trash collection, providing community development money, etc. -- but the fundamental spirit and energy for revitalization can only come from within the neighborhood itself.

4) Decision-Making by Committee

Citizen participation is the foundation of all successful neighborhood revitalization programs. This means that your project will invariably have a number of committees, each addressing a diverse spectrum of issues.

Because most neighborhood people have little experience working in committees it is vital that the proper people be chosen to chair these committees. Chairmen should know how to build cooperation and consensus, and be able to move a committee from problem analysis to decision-making to action as quickly as possible without being dictatorial.

Often some training in running a committee is useful prior to embarking on a major task.

One of the most frequent ways committees get torn apart is through the voting process. By taking a vote, some people win and others lose. Generally it is better to make decisions by asking for a consensus, instead of voting. A consensus simply means that everyone agrees to support the decision, even with minor reservations.

Decisions that have only a slight majority of supporters and a large minority of dissenters should probably be postponed, because generally the dissention will squelch any real energy to put the decision into action.

5) Those damned experts!

Do not expect to be able to accomplish the difficult task of revitalization alone. You will need experts in

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housing, finance, crime prevention, business development, and a multitude of other areas. Without some outside assistance, you will probably reach a roadblock.

However, be very careful in your choice of outsiders. Choose only those people who are willing to work closely with the neighborhood, who will train the neighborhood to continue after they leave, who will give the neighborhood the credit and recognition for the success, who will maintain a low profile, and who will not sell their souls for political gain.

Remember, you can give an outside expert the authority to make certain limited decisions, but the ultimate responsibility for all projects must remain in the neighborhood.

6) Who is to blame?

Most neighborhood people want to know the reason why their neighborhood has declined, so they look to put the blame somewhere. Typically the blame is likely to fall on the shoulders of some institution such as City Hall, the banks, or the department of transportation.

In recent years there have been major campaigns to blame banks for causing neighborhood decay by their redlining policies. While there is some truth to these allegations, there is a mounting body of evidence to indicate that eliminating redlining will have little, if any, impact on revitalizing neighborhoods.

Similarly, blaming City Hall can be a futile approach, because even if City Hall changed its policies, it would not necessarily result in a successful revitalization of a neighborhood. Policies cannot replace the love and commitment one has to their home, street or community.

In other words, be careful about blaming others for the condition of the neighborhood, because it may only be a form of "buck passing" that obscures the real issues and places the burden for revitalization outside the neighborhood. Demonizing people is a blade that cuts both ways.

7) Revitalize People, Not Just Buildings

This is a growing tendency in America: to view neighborhood revitalization primarily as a method of rehabilitating buildings. Rehabilitation of buildings is just one small part of neighborhood revitalization. But if the distinction is not made clear, the results can be devastating.

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If the emphasis is solely on buildings, gentrification will cause existing residents to be displaced, pushed to another decaying location.

When viewed as a building rehabilitation program, architectural preservation and financial investment considerations take precedence over improving the culture, and quality of life of the neighborhood's present inhabitants. Eventually low income people become displaced and they are forced to move like checkers on a checkerboard.

Revitalization means more than fixing up buildings, it has a strong spiritual dimension; it is a method for rebuilding faith in the community; it gives people pride in their heritage, pride in their community, pride in their homes, and most importantly pride in themselves. Revitalization creates organizational institutions that allow people to exercise control over their destinies.

8) Anti-Strategies

Organizing against something can be an extremely effective method of mobilizing a large number of people. In fact, it has been humorously suggested that if it weren't for the federal highway program's attempt to destroy your inner-city neighborhoods, some of America's most distinguished revitalization projects would never exist today.

Yet despite the energy generated around fighting *against* something, effective revitalization efforts must also be in *favor* of something that unites people, whether it is a park, a housing program or street improvement.

When a neighborhood spends the bulk of its energy fighting against something it runs several risks:

- a) once the fight is won, the revitalization fizzles because there is no new issue upon which to focus people's energy,
- b) people learn how to be antagonistic but don't learn how to be cooperative, so when the common enemy is defeated, the group turns on itself, or
- c) leaders emerge that know how to lead in battle, but no leaders are developed who can take over when the effort is required to shift gears and work collaboratively with banks, City Hall, politicians, etc.

9) The All-Volunteer Syndrome

Every revitalization effort makes extensive use of volunteers who attend meetings, initiate programs, and work on specific projects. As the effort begins to build,

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more and more volunteers become involved.

Eventually two problems will emerge: burnout and lack of management. Burnout can only be prevented by not allowing key leaders to become over-extended or over-committed.

You will recognize the symptoms of lack of management when volunteers begin complaining about poor communications, no follow-through, or inadequate coordination.

At this point you will need to have someone to be responsible primarily to manage the volunteers to ensure that their talents and resources are used to the greatest potential. This manager can be a part-time unpaid person until such time that the project requires a full-time paid staff person.

10) Not Every Place is a Neighborhood

As neighborhood revitalization becomes a more frequent phenomenon, more communities will begin projects. Unfortunately, many will have the mistaken idea that their residential area is a neighborhood.

However, many suburban housing developments are not really neighborhoods, because it is not a close-knit group of people with a common heritage or set of experiences, or unifying institutions. Therefore, many revitalization strategies won't work until the people develop a stronger sense of unity.

Similarly, many highly transient inner-city areas were once neighborhoods until destroyed by urban renewal, slumlords, neglect and the exodus of trusted institutions - churches, community centers, libraries, volunteer fire stations, and traditions.

In these circumstances, the problem is more complex and more expensive because the population must become more stable, often the poverty-stricken residents do not have the financial resources to begin owning their homes, new homes and jobs must be created. Under these conditions a sense of neighborhood must be created, and extensive private as well as public financial resources must be committed. And strategies in addition to those outlined in this paper must be employed. Such efforts will take at least a decade before gaining sufficient momentum to become self-sustaining.

In the final analysis, nothing changes without great leadership: committed, visionary, practical, and caring people working together for the greater good of the whole.