

## A FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZING

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For quite some time during the late 1960's, the term "organizer" was used as freely as marijuana. Everyone was an organizer. However, despite the enormous amount of political protest that occurred during these times, there are few if any remaining organizations. Yet, that is the job of the organizer: to build an organization.

In building this organization, the organizer must consider five basic factors: why organize, how will it be done organizationally, who will be a part of the organization, what is the target of the organization and what methods will be used to win victories. While it is practically impossible to map out all of these factors in advance, the organizer should stay at least one step ahead of the organizing process and be looking for ways to push the organization forward.

### I. WHY ORGANIZE?

It is important that you have a clear idea of what the goals of your organization are. Obviously you might have numerous goals, so you need to select out your long-range and short-range goals and which ones you want to tackle first.

Three guidelines to follow are:

- A. Organize to improve people's real conditions. There's no reason for people to join an organization that will make their current survival more difficult.
- B. Organize to give people a sense of their own strength. People are being acted on all the time; the organization should allow them to act collectively and eliminate the idea that individuals are the root cause of all social problems.
- C. Organize to change power relationship. Winning a reform that can be taken back despite your organization's presence is not changing the power relationship.

### II. WHAT KIND OF ORGANIZATION DO YOU NEED?

There is no particular reason that you have to start from scratch with new members, new name, new funds and leaders. A community is already a network of organizations.

In building the People's power Coalition of New York, it was simply a matter of linking up organizations scattered throughout the State and show them their common interests. In a housing issue, however, you might need to build a strong tenant organization first and then reach out to all the civic and political organizations for support.



## II.

The organizational resources of a community are generally very scarce and the organizer should try not to duplicate organizations and lay too heavy a burden on the community. The organizer needs to know the strengths and weaknesses of all community groups that might be part of a community struggle. For example, a civic group might not produce people at a demonstration, but they will provide legal assistance. A political club might not openly endorse your organization, but they will provide contacts in city government or hold up a permit an institution is requesting.

## III. WHO WILL BE A PART OF YOUR ORGANIZATION?

There are several questions that the organizer has to consider and be aware of as the organization is being built. As these questions are answered in a positive way, then the membership of your organization will increase.

- A. Whose problem is it? Obviously, it should be society's as a whole, but initially you have to determine who's hardest hit by the problem. In a poor housing situation, it is probably the tenants; but it's also the problem of the buildings next door, the Church who will lose parishioners if the tenants can't stay, the Mom and Pop store who will lose customers, etc.
- B. What is at stake? The organizer must understand all the possible effects of the problem on the community and get a sense of who will be effected. A hospital wants to build a 12 story acute-care building in your neighborhood, for example. What are some of the stakes? Will there be a greater burden on the clinics and emergency ward used by poor people? Will the property taxes go up in the community because the hospital is tax-exempt? Will people be able to afford the beds, anyway? List all the possible people involved.
- C. Can they be organized? There are a lot of people out there who you would like to organize, but you have to make a realistic assessment of how important the issue is to them and whether you can find an organizational form that will allow them to move. Senior citizens, for example, or women with large families have much to do just to survive. It is important to look around and see if there are successful models that have been developed to organize the constituency you have in mind.
- D. What can really be done and What are the RISKS. Moving people without a clear sense of what can be accomplished is very dangerous. Be sure of what you can do and can not do. Also, constantly keep in mind the risks people will have to take in joining the organization. Loss of job? Publicity? Can tenants in a hospital owned building who also work at the hospital be expected to fight the expansion?



#### IV. WHAT IS THE TARGET OF THE ORGANIZATION

You need to know the institution that you have chosen as your target as well if not better than those who presently control it. This is often not that difficult to do because you will discover that "leaders" of many institutions rule out of power and not out of knowledge. Knowing that institution makes your organization legitimate and the institution look silly.

- A. What are the sources of power over the institution? Is it regulated by the government? By Churches? Do they depend on Banks for money? Individual donors?
- B. Who controls the institution? A Board of Directors? Stockholders? Management? Law Firms? Insurance companies?
- C. How can your organization's resources hurt the Institution? For example, in Chicago a community organization wanted to get Savings and Loan Institutions to give mortgages in neighborhoods and not invest the money outside the city. They got people to sign cards saying they will only put their savings in S&L's that put money into neighborhoods. If the S&L did not agree, then people would withdraw their savings.

The organizer must constantly be probing all operations of the institution looking for weaknesses that the organization can attack.

#### V. WHAT ARE TACTICS THAT CAN BE USED

There are numerous tactics that can be used. The only question is whether the tactics employed fit within the experience of your organizations members, will disrupt the institution and build your organization.

Here are a list of commonly used tactics:

- A. Confrontation with specific demands. There is no reason for a confrontation unless you have specific demands that you can stick to.
- B. Negotiation. Make sure that it's on your own turf. That relaxes your own people and puts the institutions' leaders at a disadvantage.
- C. Public Hearings: If it's your own, make sure and control it. If it's theirs, then be clear on what can be achieved.
- D. Embarrassment: Show people who is to charge of this institution. Visit their homes, businesses, go to their churches, etc.
- E. Guerilla Theater: This is a great technique for simplifying issues, educating people in a fun way.
- F. Exposés: This should be done only with a specific direction that people should move in. A specific call for action should be a part of the exposé.



- G. Mass Demonstrations: Try and stay within the experience of the people you want to draw to the demonstration. A middle age Catholic neighborhood might not "demonstrate" but they will come out for a "silent candle light march." (See the Quaker Project check list for demonstrations.)
- H. Accountability Sessions: Invite your politicians to a session with your organization, give a presentation of your views, ask them to sign a pledge to support your organization and its demands. Make it a clear cut situation: either they are for you or against you.
- I. Legal Disruptive Actions: Strikes, picketing and leafleting. Make sure both your organization and issues are clearly present.

### PREPARING FOR ACTION

Preparing for an action is just as conscious an activity as building your organization. Here are some criteria for assessing what type of action you should take.

#### I. CRITERIA FOR SELECTING WHICH ISSUE TO ACT ON

There are numerous issues that need to be acted on, but you have to be able to assess what your organization can and CAN NOT do and what will promote its strength and what will dissipate its strength.

- A. It should involve a conflict of interest. People have to see it as an issue. It might be true that people have an intense dislike for the local Cable TV service and if so a direct action around a rate increase would be good. However, if there was no dislike for the service and hook-up charge, then a direct action would probably be a waste of time.
- B. The action should be manageable. It has to be possible for your organization to pull off. Trying to hold your own public hearing in the initiation stages of your organization might be too difficult, but an embarrassment action could be manageable.
- C. The issue should be easy to grasp. For example, a fight against a rate increase by utilities is pretty easy for people to understand; they get hit with the rising bill regularly.
- D. Consider the time factor. There is no reason to plan action around an issue if by the time the action is about to take place the issue is no longer on people's minds.
- E. The issue should have many phases. One of the reasons that the utility "issue" is a good one is that it has many phases to act on. The "sub-issues" are: public power, clean energy, rate increases, corporate control of public resources, etc.



- F. The issue you choose to act on should have a realizable victory. Either limit what you define as "victory" so that you can achieve it or learn from the experience of similar organizations on what actions lead to a successful victory on this issue.

## II. THE ACTION ITSELF

The action should be designed to focus the issue and make the demands of the organization clear and its strength overestimated.

- A. Consider the size factor. If it's a public hearing that you have called make sure the room is fillable. If it is a room or place that you are not familiar with, make sure to recon and estimate what you need to make a good showing.
- B. Personalize the issue. Figure out who is in control and let the people know about that person and attack him or her as the one responsible. Be careful, however, not to place too great an emphasis on this. The mere replacement of a person can be an easy out for an institution, but it would not change the power relations.
- C. Polarize the issue. People won't move unless the issue and conflict is quite clear and not ambiguous. The institution has one position and your organization has another.
- D. Enjoy the action. People come to an action or organization for lots of reasons, not solely out of concern for the issue. If every action or meeting of your organization is a "heavy scene," you'll quickly lose your strength.
- E. Give people a "taste of blood." Let them push up against the enemy. Show them their strength but also capitalize on this. Don't let an action solely be a "taste of blood" or a mass therapy session. Sum-up the action and what was gained.
- F. Don't do things people can do themselves. It's your talent to watch and observe people to see what they can do best and then encourage them to take action.
- G. Build your organization through action. Each action should be done so as to build your organization. That means increasing its membership, notoriety, press coverage, experience, etc. If you have a meeting, get names, addresses and phone numbers. If you have a demonstration or march, leaflet about both issues and organization.
- H. Claim victories. Don't be bashful; if your organization played a part in the victory, say so. When a rate increase for Niagara Mohawk was recently turned down, someone should have claimed victory.