

Leadership and Organizing 101

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Don't re-invent the wheel: Too many people think that it's up to them to do everything. Chances are there's already some person or group out there working on similar stuff, and if your basic vision isn't too far apart then you're probably better off joining them than starting your own new efforts. Progressive forces in our society are already stretched too thin to begin with, so spend some initial time before you begin your project investigating who's already working on what you're interested in, or at least who might be sympathetic. Do this throughout your project so that you can build coalition with others rather than having to compete for scarce resources.

Find a mentor: Learn from someone who's been involved for a long time, who comes from a different perspective than you.

Understand that the work you are doing is part of a wider context: You're standing on other people's shoulders and other people will be standing on yours. Find out what that means and what responsibilities you have as a result. Be aware of the underlying values and assumptions of the work that you're doing. The best way to get caught in a rut is to focus so much on issue work or one particular way of doing things that you lose sight of the bigger picture. Remember to look at the forest, not just the trees. In the course of your work and your outreach, draw the connections to other parts of the movement and to the root causes of our troubles.

Network! Plug into national groups that work on your issues. Get on their email lists. Network between campuses and communities, between groups on-campus, between communities affected by your target's operations.

Relationship Building: Being an organizer is not about amassing followers, but about building relationships. This means encouraging the development of people that you're working with. Share skills, information and responsibilities as widely as possible. Don't go it alone when you can get others to help you. Delegate. Your time is better invested (sometimes!) trying to find 10 people to work with you than it is trying to do the work of 10 people. If nothing else, you'll be building the capacity of our movement by training and inspiring others, even if they may seem to be slowing you down. Consider it a worthy investment... and besides, one of our goals should really be about changing the way that people relate to one another; we do this via building relationships.

Internal Democracy: If we're looking to build a world free of environmental and social oppression, we need to remove these systems of oppression from our own organizations. Top-down corporate-style organization is undemocratic and classist. Often these oppressive structures are copied in social movement groups, too. No matter what organization(s) you end up in, strive to make them democratically organized. Lack of democracy is a root cause of environmental destruction. Emphasize means as well as ends.

Avoid leaderlessness: Don't pretend that there aren't leaders in an effort to be non-hierarchical. You don't need a hierarchy, but you do need to have defined positions with accountability to the group.

Accountability: Building a decentralized movement doesn't have to mean that no one has a clue where the vehicle is headed or how it's getting there; try to work towards people

taking responsibility for important tasks, then being held accountable to the group to make sure those tasks get completed; build transparency with regards to how decisions are being made and roles are being assigned; rotate workload often enough to assure that no one person is taking on too much, but also strive to maintain continuity.

Create a wide circle of possible involvement in your work: Not everyone is going to be able to contribute to the work that you're doing at the same level of intensity that you are. Create several different avenues by which people can be involved, whether by simply keeping up with your work through listservs/newsletters and chiming in with insights when they can, giving money, volunteering here and there, or taking a leadership role if they decide that they are able to do so. Not everyone will be comfortable with every tactic your group might use -- someone who's not really into civil disobedience might be a really awesome canvasser, fundraiser or media person. Try to create space where everyone has something to contribute.

Diversity: Building relationships is more important than trying to simply "diversify" your organization. Be careful not to tokenize people. In other words, don't just invite people to join your club. Bridging the racial divide in this country is hard work. Establishing trust is key. Don't expect people of color to simply jump on your boat. See what they're doing and put in time helping their efforts if you want to break down the trust barrier. Spend time doing anti-oppression organizing. Learn where people who are different from you are coming from and what is important to them. Work through your own racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. rather than pretending that you don't have any of that.

First meeting: Break down cliques. Aggressively work to build relationships with new faces. Sit in circles, not classroom style. Collect full info on people -- pass around index cards for their info... ask for their name, phone, email, interests (possibly including major), graduation date and home (parents) contact info. Use the graduation date and home info to track them after they graduate. You can use this ever-growing alumni base for fundraising and to build pressure on the university over time.

Effective meetings / facilitation: Learn about good meeting facilitation. Rotate facilitators. Use hand signals. Strive for consensus decision-making.

Be open to hearing what others have to say: You're not always going to know what's right in every given situation, so it's better to remain flexible so that you can hear out what others have to say (sometimes they might even be right). People simply don't want to work with dogmatic, closed-minded people. Having a diversity of people at the table for discussion can often create a space whereby small gains can be made, without necessarily impeding what you want to do.

Recruiting and retaining membership: People don't always join groups for the "right" reasons. They may be joining to build a resume or to meet friends or something. Work to inject new members into the inner cliques and to build friendships, since this will keep people attached to your group. Spend one-on-one time with new people (and with leaders of other groups). Do lunch or dinner with different members

rather than with your same group of friends each time. Listen as much as you talk.

Ask. Get people involved by asking them to do things. Mass communication is impersonal and doesn't usually work. Ask specific people to do specific things that you think they'd be good at. Try to ask in person or by phone. If asking by email, personalize email subject lines so that the person's name is in it. Start with small, bite-sized things and gradually grow with their increased showing of responsibility.

Education is an ongoing process: Build further education/reflection into your efforts/organization. This will help your group to build analysis, increase their organizing skills, deepen their commitment to the work you're doing, and become more self-actualizing. Drag fellow group members to activist conferences and events, get their emails and (with their permission), sign them onto activist email lists (like SEACnet: www.seac.org/seacnet/) so that they can get inspired and learn from others.

Be Strategic: Break down your bigger goals into smaller, bite-sized achievements that can be accomplished, that will help people to build a sense of power as they accomplish those achievements, and that will at the same time further educate all involved as to the real power dynamics of our society and the need for radical change.

Institutionalize changes: There's a big difference between service projects and issue campaigns (see the SEAC article on this at www.seac.org/resources/). In one case, you're placing a bandaid on a problem, but not getting to the root of the problem. Being "radical" means getting to the *root* of a problem. Organizing for institutional changes allows you to create concrete long-term successes that you can build on, like steps. Otherwise, you'll find yourself organizing in circles (e.g.: picking up litter on the same stretch of road year to year, rather than working to phase out the packaging that results in litter in the first place).

Know when to compromise: When organizing for something, shoot for the sky, then settle for the best you can get. It's much better than asking for only half of what you really want, and getting only a fraction of that. Don't compromise your goals at the outset in an effort to seem "reasonable" or "realistic." If your real goals (like eliminating all nuclear power, fossil fuels and incineration within 20 years) aren't being taken seriously, document that they ARE possible and don't allow yourself to take positions that end up hurting other parts of our movement.

Pick the proper targets: Do what's called "power mapping" – learn who has the power to give you what you want. Don't waste your time targeting your school's president, if it's the board of trustees who really make the decisions. Consult the Midwest Academy's Strategy Charts to outline your goals, organizational considerations, allies/opponents, targets and tactics. Find it in SEAC's Organizing Guide - online at: www.seac.org/sog/

Escalate tactics: The first step is always "ask nicely and get denied." Put your requests in writing and try to get any denials in writing, if possible, so that you have a record of your attempt and your target's refusal to be reasonable. After trying that, escalate the pressure tactics until your target gives in. Make sure everyone knows that your target is being unreasonable, so that your target feels the public pressure.

ACTION!!! – There are 3 components to an effective group: democracy, organizing and direct action. An organization needs action as an individual needs oxygen. Have more actions than meetings. Be visible. Be creative. Use humor, props, etc. To test your success, remove your organizer hat (and your activist-related t-shirts!) and ask random people what they think of your organization. If they don't know or if they happen to think you don't do anything, it means that you're not visible enough.

Advertise, advertise, advertise: Make what you're doing a household word. Don't assume that people are going to hear about it through the same channels that you did. Be creative... outreach should be fun and ongoing. Be very conscious of the image that you're projecting in your advertising/outreach work though (not that you need to look and sound like young republicans, but keep in mind that if your outreach methods make people feel uncomfortable, or feel like your group is not inclusive, then they will likely pass you by). Keep in mind that people only understand things in terms of their own experience.

Media and Public Relations: PR is fundamental. You must have a unified message to the press (even if it's just the campus paper). For a good look at the public relations efforts you're up against, check out the books *Toxic Sludge is Good for You!* and *Trust Us, We're Experts!* by the Center for Media and Democracy (www.prwatch.org). Make the other side look like the extremists and your folks look as the reasonable ones. Seek wide appeal. Use community media as well as campus media (community media is the most effective place to embarrass a university).

Follow your heart: If you find yourself sacrificing your morals today in order to amass more power so that you can make real change at some undetermined point in the future, you'd better check yourself and make sure you know what your real motives are. Tomorrow might find you a more cynical, less energetic person who doesn't feel as strongly about issues that are important to you now. On the other hand, chances are that if you decide to sell-out at some point in the future, there will still be plenty of opportunities to do so. Go for the radical stuff NOW while you're young and idealistic. People work much harder and get more done when they believe in what they're doing. You'll accomplish more if your heart's in it.

Pass on what you know: When you graduate from/drop out of college you are at the peak of your student organizing skills. Don't just walk away from the youth movement, because now is when we need you most. Look at it as an opportunity to give back to the movements and organizers who have so strongly affected your outlooks/ideals. A good organizer is someone who builds a strong organization that will stay strong even after they've left -- if your group collapses after you leave, then what have you really accomplished?

Keep good records: Preserve the history of your group through websites, scrapbooks and the institutional memory of those who will be available to the group for a long time (faculty advisors, community members, etc.). Some campus groups use "disorientation guides" for this purpose.

Recommended Reading:

Rules for Radicals by Saul Alinsky

The Trajectory of Change – Activist Strategies for Social

Transformation by Michael Albert (South End Press)

Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists by Kim Bobo