

Introduction

There are basic tools and principles to organizing, but they are not cookie cutters. They must be evaluated and adapted to meet the needs of your local situation. So *Basics of Organizing* should not be viewed as a cookie cutter to be applied to your situation, but as guidelines and suggestions to be evaluated and adapted to meet your needs and particular situation.

Originally, this manual was written with staff in mind. However, times are changing and leadership may have to take on more of the responsibility traditionally performed by hired staff. Therefore, we hope this manual will be helpful to both staff and leaders.

The success of your organizing drive will not depend upon this manual. Only your hard work and dedication to organizing will make changes happen.

This manual is dedicated to community residents, leaders and organizers who, through their organizing, have won specific victories for their communities and have given hope and dignity to communities and people across our country.

Shel Trapp
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Door-Knocking

We go out into the community knocking on doors to find out what the community is thinking and feeling. If you know of a different way to find that out, fine. But if an organization is to truly represent a community, it is essential that the organization stays in constant touch with the residents of that community: What do they feel or think about the community? What do they want to see changed? Improved? Most organizations have found that door-knocking is the best technique to obtain that input.

When you are door-knocking, you are basically either *fishing*, *selling* or *pushing*, or some combination of the three. When door-knocking, you have about 30 seconds to identify yourself, state your purpose and convince the person behind

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the door the I are not a bill collector, selling Bibles or casing their home for a break-in. Recognizing this, you must immediately identify yourself and try to mention some organization which the people will know.

Hello, I'm ___ and I work with the [block club, Citizens United, the church on the corner]. We are talking with people in the neighborhood to get their ideas on how the community can be improved.

Fishing

This is when you are attempting to find an issue. After the introduction, you might say something like this:

If you could change one thing in the community, what would it be?

What do you think should be done to improve the block?

What one thing bothers you most about the community?

If this gets no specific response, you might suggest something you have seen on the block.

I noticed the building on the corner looks kind of run down, do you know who owns it?

This should shift the discussion to a specific and what might be done about it.

When fishing, you will usually get general responses such as:

The neighborhood is run down.

The neighborhood is so dirty.

The neighborhood isn't like it used to be.

Your job is to make these general responses into something specific by asking questions:

What do you mean by dirty?

Can you point to one specific spot that is particularly dirty?

Once you get a specific issue, then you ask:

Would you be willing to come to a meeting about the pile of dirt and trash on the corner?

Depending upon how strongly you think the person feels about the issue, you may even ask if the meeting could be held in his or her home next Tuesday.

If you have scored and the person agrees to hold the meeting, then you will probably stop fishing and start selling when you move to the next door.

Selling

There are basically two types of selling: selling an issue, or selling memberships in the organization. The following should provide a guideline for selling an issue:

After the introduction:

A lot of the neighbors have been saying how dirty the neighborhood looks, particularly up on the corner where the city sweeper dumps his load. I've heard that sometimes that pile of trash lays there for a week or more. Would you be interested in coming to a meeting to discuss what we can do about it?

If there is interest, start talking about date, time and place for the meeting and, if possible, even getting the meeting set for that person's home in the next few days.

If there is no interest, then you are back to fishing.
What concerns you about the community?

SELLING MEMBERSHIPS After the introduction, you have a press me why it is to my advantage to join your organization. What have you done for families like mine? . . . The implication is that if you have won things for people like me in the past, then you will win things for families like mine in the future.

We are the organization that stopped the gas company's rate hike. Because of that, we saved the average customer \$225.00 per year. That is almost \$20.00 per month, and our membership fee is only \$15.00 for a year, and with that we send you a monthly newsletter to keep you up to date on consumer issues.

Whether you are selling an issue or memberships, the basic question that must be addressed is, "What's in it for me?" In door-knocking, you are appealing to a person's self interest.

Pushing

This is similar to selling, but differs in that not only do you have an issue, you have a date, time, and place for the meeting.

After the introduction:

A lot of the neighbors are complaining about the street sweeper dumping his trash at the corner. We are getting together next Tuesday at 7:30 at the church on the corner. We have invited the head of sanitation and she has agreed to come to the meeting. This is a good time to get something done about the trash once and for all. Will you be able to come?

If there is interest, repeat the date, time and place, give a flier and ask if there is anyone else they can talk with about the meeting. If there seems little interest:

Well, there will be time to discuss other issues. What would you like to see us do something about?

•Hints

1. You may want to ask for a phone number. This depends on how comfortable the person feels with you. It can be a threat to some folks.
2. If you take notes in front of people, tell them what you are doing so they do not think you are taking notes about the make of their TV.

I just want to make a note that you brought up the problem with the rats so I don't forget it.

A good method is to carry 3 x 5 cards in your pocket, and as you are walking to the next house merely write down the address and the issue.

3515 — rats

3517 — hates the organization

3521 — promised info on city sidewalk program

When you get back to the office, you can see what follow-up you must do. Also, the next time you go on the block you can take your cards so you have a point of reference to begin talking with people.

3. If you promise information to people, make sure you get it to them.
4. If you are asked a question for which you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to admit you don't know. Honesty is better than making a fool of yourself.
5. If you are met with hostility, don't get into an argument. You won't win

- anyway, a , ou will merely turn the person off to the organization. Simply offer thanks for the time and move on.
6. Dress in an acceptable way for the community. In some areas, that may mean no jeans. Do not wear buttons other than an organization button; the person behind the door may not support your particular concern.
 7. Remember, you are an intrusion into the life of the person behind the door.

Identifying Issues

Just because you think it is an issue does not make it an issue. Just because you think it is not an issue does not mean it is not an issue.

When you find what appears to be an issue, three questions must be asked:

1. Can people be mobilized around this?
 2. Is it specific?
 3. Can something be done to change this situation?
- If people cannot be mobilized around an issue, then you do not have an issue. A good way to "test" an issue is to call several people in your organization, talk about the situation and then ask:

Would you be interested in getting a few folks together to talk about this and see what can be done?

Or, you can bring it up at a leadership meeting on another issue at the end of the meeting to see what kind of reaction you get.

Issues must be made specific before anything can be done: there is a big difference between a concern and an issue. You can't do anything about concerns; you can win issues! Bad housing is a concern. The building at 1432 W. Whipple, with no heat, broken porch railing, owned by absentee owner Mr. Smith, is an issue and can be organized on. Health care is a concern. The fact that the local drug store will not sell generic drugs is an issue. When people say that the "community is run down," that is a concern. But you can make it into an issue by getting them to define what they mean by "run down." It could mean there are potholes in the streets, that a street light is out, that the police don't respond quickly, or that their neighbors just got a dog that barks. To be something that the organization can work on, the concern must be translated into a *specific* issue.

Can something be done or changed? Your local organization cannot change the state welfare system. But it can make sure residents in the community get all the benefits to which they are entitled and that they are treated with respect at the aid office. You must make sure the issues your organization takes on are not beyond the scope and power of your organization and that you can realistically expect to win or change something about the issue.

A couple of other points about issues: If you are going to ... : an issue which looks like it will take a long time to win, then you have to ... up and celebrate intermediate victories.

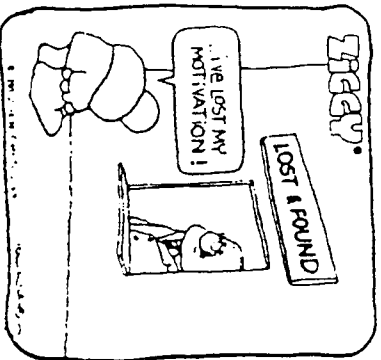
The issue is really moving now, we have a meeting with the Mayor. For the first time, the Planning Department has agreed to meet with a community organization. We are rolling now!

Also, in a long organizing drive, make sure you have plenty of alternate targets: You cannot ask people to go picket an enemy every Saturday for six months. You must look for alternate targets. Does the enemy sit on a board of directors of some agency or corporation? Then visit that agency or corporation and ask associates there to call your enemy and come to a meeting. Does the enemy belong to an clubs or organizations or a church? The same type of visit can be made. We have even gone to the home of a mayor in the suburb where our enemy lived and asked the mayor to give our enemy a call to come to a meeting. The enemy's associates are usually willing to make these phone calls because they want to get out of the controversy.

In a long organizing drive there have to be alternative targets so people do not get bored and so the enemy has pressure coming from a variety of sources at the same time.

Make sure you personalize the enemies. Issues are not caused by systems. Issues are caused by people in the system who are not doing their job. The system for regular garbage pick-ups in the neighborhood there, but the people employed by the sanitation department may not be implementing the system. Therefore, you do not attack a system, you attack Terry Smith Director of Sanitation.

Remember the two sentences at the head of this section. Organizations have organized on some very strange issues, have won a built the organization. Some examples these issues: shopping carts, bells on ice cream trucks, toilet paper at the school. None of these is earth shaking, but they were won, a constituency was built and the organization moved on to bigger issues.



Identifying Leaders

I have never had anyone come up to me and say, "Hi, I'm a leader and would I lead your organization." Nor have I ever walked into a room and seen a person with a big "L" on the forehead. Finding and developing leadership is a sh