

ORGANIZING TO BUILD POWER

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What is Organizing?

Organizing is building power among a group of individuals to influence people, policies, and outcomes. In organizing, power is defined as the ability to act and achieve purpose. Power is inherently neutral, neither good nor bad. If we want to achieve our goals, we need the power to do so.

Power comes in two forms: money and people. In the context of tenant and community organizing, we are typically trying to build people power (oftentimes being up against money power) by organizing a group of individuals around shared self-interest, relationships, strategies, and issues.

Organizing and advocacy are distinct from one another as tools used to change people's material circumstances. While advocacy is a useful way for one or more individuals to speak on behalf of a community they do not necessarily belong to, organizing is about building collective power among the members of an impacted community.

Why Organize?

Organizing balances power. When ordinary people come together to take collective action on their own behalf, they have a greater ability to influence people in decision-making positions. Organizing subverts existing oppressive structures to create a more just distribution of power. However, it is also equally important to recognize your own power. Traditional models of organizing may not work for everyone, but there is value in embracing your power by sharing your story and lived experiences with stakeholders. By owning and understanding this power, you can harness it to advocate in space not originally designed to empower low-income people.

Organizing does not stop when an immediate problem is fixed. As a group, individuals can identify systemic problems that appear in their communities and demand long-term solutions.

What is Grassroots Organizing?

Grassroots organizing refers to organizing individuals with lived expertise around a specific issue and strategy. Grassroots organizing often takes place in a particular locality and/or region and is centered on ensuring individuals with lived experience in that locality develop and execute a strategy around a specific issue they communally want to change. Organizers train individuals on how they themselves can organize so that campaigns are led by those most impacted. Meeting with an elected official, giving testimony in front of a governing body, and attending a training on a policy do not necessarily represent grassroots organizing as isolated, one-off events. These events are usually steps in a continuous strategy toward a campaign goal.

The Cycle of Organizing



The cycle of community organizing is a vital roadmap for any successful organizing campaign. Although the cycle might look slightly different between varying organizing traditions, it is typically broken into five phases: base building, issue selection, research, action, and evaluation. Throughout each phase of the cycle, organizers must invest in the leadership development of the individuals being organized. The goal of an organizer is to develop and train impacted people to create a self-sustaining organization of individuals with shared self-interest. A known principle of community organizing is: “organizers teach leaders, leaders organize.”

PHASE 1: BASE BUILDING

Building a base is about asking the question that organizer Ella Baker once asked: “Who are your people?” Building a base requires organizers to clearly understand the community or population they wish to organize. In the context of housing organizing, organizers might seek to organize a group of tenants in a particular building or individuals experiencing housing insecurity throughout a city or region. After identifying the community an organizer wishes to organize (or being invited into said community, which is the ideal), they must then engage in activities to build the core committee of leaders who will drive the prospective

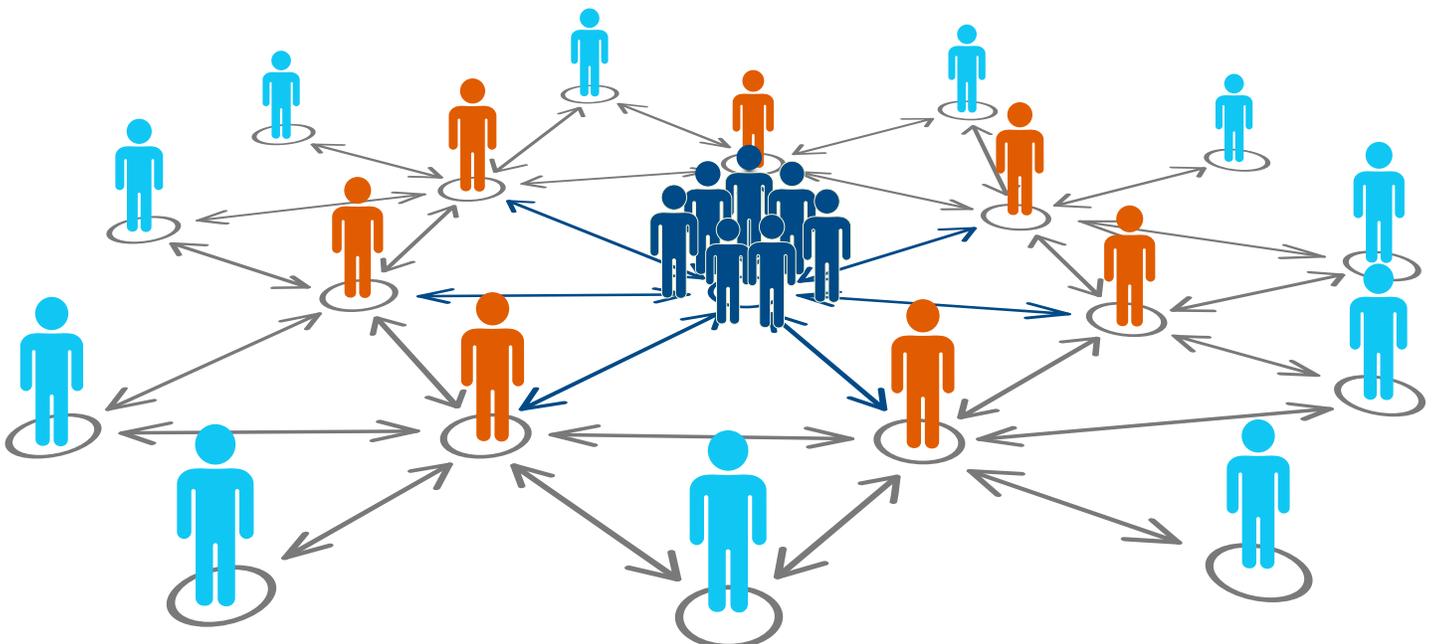
campaign forward. A way to think about building a base is through the “snowflake model” popularized by longtime organizer and lecturer, Marshall Ganz. A strong base cannot be built around one individual, but rather a central committee of numerous leaders who are identified and trained by the organizer. Those leaders are then responsible for identifying other individuals to bring into the work based on strong relationships and shared self-interest. Relationships are built between organizers and leaders, and among leaders themselves, through protracted and strategic individual conversations.

Potential Leadership development opportunity:

Organizers should train individuals on how to conduct strategic one-on-one conversations for the purpose of bringing more people into a given campaign.

PHASE 2: CHOOSING AN ISSUE

A distinction is made in organizing between problems and issues. In the second phase of the organizing cycle, an organizer and their base work together to choose one or more issues to launch a campaign around. Before picking an issue, the base must identify the problem. In an organizing context, problems are vague, overwhelming, and hard to build a campaign around. For example, homelessness is a problem; it



is an overwhelming theme and, in many ways, vague. Launching a campaign to end homelessness would be extremely difficult because there is not one concrete ask or policy change that would immediately solve the problem of homelessness in its entirety. Instead of launching a campaign to end homelessness, organizers must work with their base through a process called “issue slicing.”

Issue slicing is the process by which organizers and their base identify a problem in question and identify specific issues that contribute to the overarching problem. For example, if a lack of tenant protections is a problem, passing legislation to enact just cause eviction in a city or state is an issue by which an organizer and their base can launch a campaign around. Passing just cause legislation would not completely solve the problem of a lack of tenant protections, but it would chip away at that larger problem and possibly give momentum to other issue campaigns like passing habitability standards, eliminating junk fees in leases, eliminating application fees, reforming tenant applicant screening processes, etc. To use an analogy, if a lack of tenant protections is the trunk of the tree and its branches and leaves, an absence of just cause legislation is one of many roots that keep the tree sturdy and entrenched. It is an organizer’s job to cut away at the roots to ultimately topple the tree. Regardless of the issue that an organizer and their base organize around, the issue must be 1) achievable 2) politically relevant and 3) widely and deeply felt by the community in which one is organizing.

Potential Leadership development opportunity: Work with a leader to create and disseminate a survey to canvass other tenants and/or community members to get a better sense of what issues are widely and deeply felt in the community.

PHASE 3: RESEARCH

The primary goals for the research phase are for the base to have a solid understanding of the policy around the issue and who the targets need to be, i.e., who are the people that need to be influenced to win. Now that the base has selected an issue, it is time to learn as much as possible about the issue to develop a winning strategy. Why is this an issue in the first place?

Why haven’t policymakers fixed this issue already? Who are the people that have tried to fix this issue before? Who are the policymakers that hold the most power to give us what we want? How much will it cost to make the change we want to see? Research should also be used to map out who the allies are on an issue and how a strategy can be developed and executed with their help and input. Research meetings are also vital to the development of a strategy and an accurate understanding of who holds the most power over a particular issue.

Research meetings, also called research actions, are planned meetings between a base and a potential target, who is often a policymaker. The goal of the research meeting is to gather as much information as possible from the target to be able to accurately assess where they stand on the issue. Is the person you are meeting with an outspoken ally or a fervent opponent? Can this person be moved and, if so, what leverage is needed to do so? By the end of the research phase, one primary target should be identified, and the base should have a clear understanding of said target’s self-interest and what it will take to influence them. While the primary target is the person who has the most direct authority over your issue, you might also identify secondary targets, those who can be leveraged to influence your primary target. For example, if your primary target is the chair of your city council, a secondary target could be another council member with whom the chair has a close relationship.

Potential Leadership development opportunity: It is an organizer’s job to prepare leaders of a base on how to run a research meeting rather than the organizer leading the meeting. Organizers do not give people voices but rather build the stage and set up the sound system so individuals with lived expertise can share their own voices. During a research meeting there should be roughly ten leaders in the room, and each person should have a role. For example, one leader should chair the meeting while others are prepared to ask preconstructed questions. Other leaders can take notes and keep time. Leaders should also have their own agenda for the meeting that could be sent ahead of time to assert more control over the conversation.

PHASE 4: ACTION

Now that the base has done its research to learn about the policy of an issue, identify targets, and develop a strategy, it is time to take action. It is worth noting that the action phase of the cycle (boycotts, protests, social media campaigns, etc.) comes near the end of the organizing cycle, only after a base is built and strategy devised. When it is time to act, organizers and their base must decide 1) who the target of that action is (either your primary target or a secondary target) and 2) what it would take to influence that target. Targets are never organizations or institutions, but rather a specific individual. For example, planning an action targeting Congress as an institution would not be effective because it is far too vague and not immediately measurable. Instead, an example of a strategic target could be the chair of the congressional committee that could pass or halt a bill you are trying to get passed.

After conducting research to better understand a target's self-interest, organizers can plan actions based on that target's self-interest. Some questions to consider when planning an action are: Is the target a newer member of an elected body? When is the target up for reelection? Will the target have competition in the reelection bid? What is the press saying about the target? Does our base include the target's constituents who might be able to exercise increased influence over them? Planning successful actions takes numerous strategy sessions. Although occasionally our actions might be in reaction to a harmful policy, the ideal is for the organizer and their base to have control over when, where, and how the action takes place.

After executing the action, it is important to look for the target's reaction to measure success. In other words, how did the target respond to our action? Did they make an immediate statement? If they did not respond or react at all, then maybe we do not have the necessary power to influence that target, which means we need a larger base and potentially a broader coalition.

Potential Leadership development opportunity:

Actions are tremendous opportunities for leadership development. Leaders within your base can have positions on the committee to plan the action and should also set individual and group goals for turnout.

Turnout should never be the responsibility of the organizer alone, but a shared responsibility of the group.

PHASE 5: EVALUATION

Although it is critical to consistently evaluate throughout each phase of the organizing cycle, it is equally important to set aside time at the end of a campaign to intentionally look back and evaluate what went well and what needs to change for the next campaign. Regardless of the outcome of a campaign, evaluation and reflection are key to maintaining morale and momentum among a base.

Potential Leadership development opportunity: Leaders can be trained to facilitate evaluation sessions with their peers. They can also take on other roles like notetaker and timekeeper and draft surveys and evaluation forms to gather feedback.

Additional Resources

For additional training in how to plan and launch an effective organizing campaign, please reach out to Billy Cerullo, Manager of Training and Innovation, at wcerullo@nlihc.org. NLIHC provides direct trainings and technical support to its members around each phase of the organizing cycle. If you are not yet a member of NLIHC, you can become one by visiting the following link: <https://nlihc.org/membership>.