

Community Organizing: People Power from the Grassroots

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THE FOUR STRATEGIES

There are four fundamental strategies available to neighborhood groups to address community problems: community organizing, advocacy, service delivery or development. There is no right or wrong strategy - each organization has to choose among them constantly. Each group should specialize - the skills needed to do a good job in one are seldom those needed for another. Sometimes, groups use a combination of strategies. What is important here is that you know what you're doing - that the method matches the strategy you've chosen and they both match the mission the group has adopted. This article will focus on defining and developing the ideas behind community organizing.

Community organizing is characterized by the mobilizing of volunteers. Staff roles are limited to helping volunteers become effective, to guiding the learning of leaders through the process, and to helping create the mechanism for the group to advocate on their own behalf. Community organizing almost always includes confrontation of some sort. The people who want something get themselves together to ask for it, often the people who could give them what they want get jumpy. Community organizing strategies include meeting with corporate or government decision makers to hold them accountable for their actions, designing programs for others (not the group) to implement that meet the needs of the community, and aggressive group action to block negative developments or behaviors (highway construction that leads to neighborhood destruction, etc.).

Advocacy and Service Delivery are both characterized by doing FOR people. Often professionals like lawyers or social workers will attack a problem on behalf of those perceived as unable to speak for themselves. Job referral services, social work, training for job readiness, homeownership counseling, business plan preparation training - these are methods which fit into the Advocacy or Service Delivery strategy.

Development is a strategy that gets the group directly into the business of delivering a physical product. Generally, groups select a development strategy because the normal course of events is not meeting the areas needs. The profit motive either does not bring private developers into the area - they can't make enough money - or it brings them in to do the wrong thing - they are converting moderate cost rental units into yuppie condos. Development could mean housing or commercial or even industrial development. Development methods require, like the other two strategies, particular skills. Many groups have struggled to achieve good results in housing development with staff whose training, experience and interests are in community organizing, causing pain and suffering for the group and the staff. This is unfair. If we understand the distinction between the strategies, we can see the different resources needed for the methods that fit within them.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

Community organizing is the process of building power through involving a constituency in identifying problems they share and the solutions to those problems that they desire; identifying the people and structures that can make those solutions possible; enlisting those targets in the effort through negotiation and using confrontation and pressure when needed; and building an institution that is democratically controlled by that constituency that can develop the capacity to take on further problems and that embodies the will and the power of that constituency.

Heather Booth, founder of the Midwest Academy and legendary community organizer, expressed the fundamentals in this formula:

OOO = Organizers Organize Organizations.

Community organizing is NOT a technique for problem solving. Those who would use simple confrontation or mass meetings to meet their own selfish need for power, and skip the step of democratic involvement and control in the selecting of issues, the crafting of demands or the negotiating of the victory are called demagogues. Their organizations are a hollow sham, without the empowering aspect that humanizes and ennobles the effort.

Community organizing is not merely a process that is good for its own sake. Unless the organization wins concrete, measurable benefits for those who participate, it will not last long. The groups that content themselves with holding endless meetings and plod along involving everyone in discussions that never lead to action or to victory are doomed to shrink into nothing. People want to see results. That's why they get involved. There is a theory (isn't there always?) that says that folks join up if two things are true. First, they must see a potential for either benefit

or harm to themselves if the group succeeds or fails. Second, they must see that their personal involvement has an impact on the whole effort. This makes sense to me. Winning is critical, but if the group's going to win whether I get involved or not - if my personal involvement is not critical - then I can stay home and watch TV.

Community organizing is not just a neighborhood thing, not just a minority thing, not just a 60's thing. Many - especially those uncomfortable with a particular community organizing effort because it's confronting them at the time - seek to 'label' organizing as somehow out of date or out of place. The fact is that the method, the strategy the science of community organizing has been applied all over the world in situations as disparate as Solidarity in Poland, Welfare Rights in the US and 'comunidades del base' in Brazil. The simple principles of community organizing are being applied right now in the barrios of San Antonio and in the ghettos of Baltimore. They are winning victories and building power. We can too.

The Principles of Community Organizing

What are these simple principles? What is the essence of the science of power, applied through the art of community organizing?

FIRST, people are motivated by their self interest. This is important to motivating involvement from the community that's being organized. It's also key to developing effective strategies to pressure the opposition into giving up what the community wants. Many people are uncomfortable with self interest. They'd rather focus on values, on selfless giving, or on mutual aid as the highest virtue. All these may be true, and we might hope that human beings could somehow be changed into angels. Human nature fails the angel test every time, though.

Effective community organizing can develop a broader sense of self interest - this is where hope comes in to the picture. How can we broaden the sense of self interest? Through a process of building up the horizons of the people we are organizing. It seems to me that people are taught everyday in countless little ways that the system is not going to change, no matter what they do. We learn to stand in line and fold our hands on our desks in school. We see politicians betray promises daily, with very little regard for the faith that voters place in them before the election. We see the rich get richer, the powerful escape the consequences of wrongdoing. In all these ways, we learn that nothing we do will change the way things are. Out of simple self preservation, we begin to lower our horizons, to shrink into a world we define by our ability to have an impact.

Think about the last time you were in a meeting, and the room was too hot or too cold. You may have looked around for a door to open, a window to crack, or even a thermostat. I'll bet, if you found none of these, you stopped being bothered by the room, though. What if you were right next to the thermostat, but it was locked? Wouldn't the heat bother you more, and if you knew where the key was, or who could turn down the heat, wouldn't the temptation to DO SOMETHING become almost irresistible? In the same way, our view of our own self interest

gets shrunk down to the arena in which we believe we can have an impact. Community organizing seeks to teach people, through experience, that they can be effective in a larger and larger sphere - their own block, their own neighborhood, their city, their state, and so on. In the process, we redefine our idea of self - who else is 'us' - and thus, of self interest.

SECOND, community organizing is a dynamic process, that requires constant attention and effort. It is impossible to use community organizing to get to a certain point and stop, or to build a community organization up and then stop reaching out for new folks and taking on new issues. The process of development that we described above - broadening peoples' view of their own self interest - is mirrored in the political arena.

We see this dynamic aspect in the initial stage of building a group. At first, some people will want to take on big issues, and some will identify more achievable goals. The organizer will push for a winnable project so that the group can get stronger slowly. The formula for building a new organization is:

FWFWFLFH

This stands for Fight, Win, Fight, Win, Fight, Lose, Fight Harder. Any group that can pick its issues - and this is sometimes impossible - needs to take this process seriously.

What's necessary in these early stages to grow a strong group? Although simpler, lower risk issues could be addressed quickly and behind the scenes, it is especially important that they be handled the same way the big ones would. For example, even if you know that the city will put up a stop sign upon request, you should still hold a press conference on the street corner and a march to city hall to demand it, then negotiate with the traffic engineer over which tree it will be posted on. A musical mom I know tells her children that 'practice makes PERMANENT, GOOD practice makes perfect!' If people in the early stages of a group learn that all it takes is a phone call to get things done, they'll look to the same strategy next time. Community organizing is a process of teaching people to work together, and how to be effective.

THIRD, it's important that, at an early stage of the development of any group, they learn to deal with conflict and confrontation. Some people see this as manipulation, as tricking people. Obviously, some groups and some organizers are guilty of this. In the final analysis, though, groups must learn confrontation and negotiation because they'll eventually have to use both. Many of the problems that confront low income and minority communities can be solved by coordination and determination, simply by focusing people of good will on a commonly understood problem. But most of the fundamental problems are deeply rooted in greed and power, and there are those who benefit from the status quo. Slum landlords might make as much or more providing decent, safe housing, but not many will see it that way. If we are to build organizations that can have any serious impact at all, they will eventually have to come up against a situation where there will be winners and losers. The potential losers are not likely to lay down and roll over because of the righteousness of our cause. If the group has never stood strong before, if they have never made a demand before, if they've never faced a target that really had to be forced into complying, they're more likely to back down when the going gets tough. If

confrontation is not one of the tools in our toolbox, then we're likely to ignore problems that require toughness to be addressed.

FOURTH, in selecting an issue to work on, every group has to take into account the fundamental definition of an issue. A neighborhood, a minority group, a group of workers or people who share any common complaint can be a community that wants to get organized. Typically, there is a tangled web of problems - complaints, irritations, bad situations, oppressions, difficulties, injustices, crises, messes. An issue is a problem that the community can be organized around. I learned a formula to describe this distinction from Stan Holt, Director of People Acting through Community Effort, in Providence, RI in 1971, when he gave me and another raw recruit our 6 hours of basic training before he sent us out door to door. He used the initials I S R on the chalkboard in the dingy little office at Broad and Public (I thought it was a pretty apt address for a community group - and I'm NOT making it up!). Immediate, specific and realizable. (I never could spell that last one) An organizer 'cuts' an issue - interprets or massages perceptions or manipulates situations until they fit these criteria as closely as possible. The thought process was to become automatic after a dozen years.

Immediate, he said, in terms of either the benefit folks would get from victory or, preferably, the harm they would suffer from inaction. 'The bulldozers are coming and you'll be out on the street tomorrow' is far better than 'would you like to be part of a community planning process'.

Specific refers to both the problem and its solution. Vacant buildings are a problem. That building that we want torn down by the end of the month is an issue.

Realizable (it's easier to spell winnable, but it's not the way I learned, what can I do?) is the toughest of all. It's easy to describe the extreme, the global problem beyond the reach of a Block Club or a neighborhood organization. That's not a good issue, especially not in the early stages. Most effective community organizations can point to victories that any sane person would say were far beyond their reach, though. Who would have thought that a handful of neighborhood folks concerned about their children would get the government to buy their homes and relocate their families, putting Love Canal into the language as a symbol of environmental disaster in the process. Who would have said that East Toledo could get agreement and construction on a \$10 million dollar road project that would open up employment possibilities for their neighborhood, and only five years from concept to construction? It remains true, though, that calculating the odds on winning is an important first step.

The key to this aspect of 'cutting an issue' is calculation. The organizer - volunteer or staff - has to look with a cold, hard balancing of accounts at all the factors on our side and their side of the issue, and determine whether it's worth starting out on. Some factors to consider include: who is effected by the problem, and can I get to them? How much does the problem hurt them, and how hard are they likely to fight? Are they able to escape easily, or is standing and fighting their only option? What resources are we likely to need and can we get them? On the other side, who benefited from the problem the way things are, and how much? Could they easily give us what we want, or would it cost them, and how much? Who else is peripherally hurt - or helped - by the way things are? How would the solution we seek change this equation? Could we go after

something that would help us just as much, but get us more friends? In the end, all we can do is step out. The more we've tried to peer ahead, the less likely we are to stumble.

THE TEN RULES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

1. Nobody's going to come to the meeting unless they've got a reason to come to the meeting.
2. Nobody's going to come to a meeting unless they know about it.
3. If an organization doesn't grow, it will die.
4. Anyone can be a leader.
5. The most important victory is the group itself.
6. Sometimes winning is losing.
7. Sometimes winning is winning.
8. If you're not fighting for what you want, you don't want enough.
9. Celebrate!
10. Have fun!

The first rule: Nobody's going to come to the meeting unless they've got a reason to come to the meeting. Like many of my ten 'rules', this seems self-evident. All of them, however, represent lessons that I have learned over twenty years of making the same mistakes, taking the same basics for granted, and paying the price over and over again, until the lesson is finally learned. I have observed this rule being broken by groups all across the country, groups with experience, groups with talented staff and leaders, who know better, or should. Giving folks a REASON to attend means two things. First, interpreting the issue as related to them. This means developing a 'line' or a 'rap' that sells the issue simply and personally. Even if the issue has been thought through, if the story can't be told simply and quickly in an exciting way, the people are less likely to respond. The organizer has to be able to answer the question 'what's in it for me?' We must GIVE people the reason - this should have been thought through in the planning stage, but in the actual implementation of a campaign, there must be considerable attention to how it's going to be communicated. For example, if the issue is the need for better equipment at the local park, there should be more than one approach, going beyond the obvious. Kids who might use the park will be attracted because the new equipment might be fun. How to sell the issue to their parents? What about neighbors who don't have kids? People who live too far away to benefit directly? A planning group usually grapples with this problem when they're putting together the flyer and the phone call 'rap' sheet - or they should. In this case, a phone rap might look like this:

Call Sheet - Parks Meeting - call in results to : Joe Schmoe, 123-4567 by Wednesday at 7 pm.

"Hi, my name is _____, and I'm calling for the MidRiver Neighborhood Organization. Do you have children in school?"

IF YES: We're having a meeting about the playground tomorrow night over at the school at 7:30. Have your children ever been injured on the broken equipment? (LISTEN) Have they ever been cut or hurt on the asphalt? (LISTEN) Would you like to have a safe, well equipped facility to send them to? Well, this is what we're working for. We have the head of Parks for the City coming, and we want to show him just how many people want action. Will you be able to come to the meeting?

IF NO: Have you ever been bothered by the kids hanging out on the corners or playing on the street? (LISTEN) Does it bother you that the parks on the other side of the river have brand new equipment, and kids here in MidRiver have to play in the glass and asphalt, on broken swings? Did you know they just spent \$28,000 to put grass in the park on River Road, and it's been 14 years since they spent a dime on our park? We're having a meeting about the playground tomorrow night over at the school at 7:30. We have the head of Parks for the City coming, and we want to show him just how many people want action. Will you be able to come to the meeting?

Names & Numbers----- Yes -----No -----Ride

1. 2. 3. 4.

These two 'raps' seek to interpret the problem in terms of the self interest of the person you're talking to, and thus to get their interest aroused enough to come out.

The second aspect of a REASON to come to the meeting is what happens at the meeting. If the people in the audience are there just to cover a chair, and they are not asked to participate, or there's no chance to ask questions or tell their story, they will find it easier and easier to drop out. The agenda for the meeting should always include a time for individual stories to be told, to put a human face on the problem. Mrs. Schultz should be lined up in advance to come to the mike and tell about poor little Otto who went to the hospital for stitches after he fell off the broken swing. The chair should ask if anybody else has had kids hurt, and ask them to stand, or raise their hand, or even come to the mike. The agenda should include parts for lots of people - not just one chair who speaks and leads and asks the questions of the city folks or the other targets, but plenty of folks trooping up to do their pre-assigned parts -- the more folks who have a part, the more are likely to come out. Even spectators can get the feeling that, next time, they could have an important part in the group, if there are obviously lots of parts being given out. A one-person show, however, tends to stay that way.

The second rule is: Nobody's going to come unless they know about it. This is another painfully obvious point. Time after time, though, I have helped groups analyze their shrinking participation, and found that they've ignored this rule. They publicize meetings through the newsletter. The newsletter is distributed door to door by block captains. Half the blocks have no

captains. On the other half, the newsletters were delivered for distribution on Tuesday night after 7, and the meeting was held on Thursday. Even where the conscientious block captains actually went to every house on the block and dropped one off on Wednesday afternoon when they got home from work, about a third of the folks didn't go to the front porch until the next morning, another third read the story about crime on the front page, but missed the meeting notice, and another third thought it MUST be next Thursday they're talking about. Many groups rely on a regular meeting night and a telephone tree to get people out. Others just invite the ones who came to this meeting to come back to the next one.

In fact, there is an almost unbreakable ratio - for every one hundred folks who get a timely, well crafted written notice and a follow-up personal contact by phone or in person, ten will come out. Late notices or wordy, unclear ones cut further into the final count. No personal contact cuts even further. Organizing is hard work, and there are few shortcuts worth taking. A group that doesn't plant seeds with effective outreach should not be surprised when the harvest is sparse.

The third rule is: if an organization doesn't grow, it will die. A good outreach effort will bring out new recruits. These folks must be put to work. Somebody has to recognize their effort in coming out, and talk to them, welcome them, give them a chance to get into things. Could they do calls for the next meeting? Would they like to help with posters for the fundraiser? What did they think of the meeting? Each issue should bring in new folks, and there should always be a next issue on the horizon, to get out and touch the community with, to find yet newer folks to get involved with. People naturally fade in and out of involvement as their own life's rhythms dictate - people move, kids take on baseball for the Spring, they get involved with Lamaze classes, whatever. If there are not new people coming in, the shrinkage can be fatal. New issues and continuous outreach are the only protection against this natural process.

Rule four: anyone can be a leader. I have had the privilege of working with a wide variety of very talented community leaders in twenty years of community organizing. I can safely and in all humility admit that not one new leader was 'developed' because of my foresight and careful cultivation and training of a new recruit who showed clear promise. Almost without exception, the best leaders have been people who rose to the occasion of a crisis. The priest who spoke at all our news conferences got sick at the last minute. Who can take his place? Mrs. H., you're the only one at home, and the thing starts in five minutes - let me pick you up and brief you in the car. What do you mean, Mr. President, you're not going to run for reelection? This organization is big, it's new, and nobody else is ready! Mr. T., you have to run, or else we'll have those guys from UpThere in charge of the group, and we can't have that, can we? The only wisdom or craft I can claim in any of these scenes is an ability to convince people to step into a tough situation and give it a try, coupled with a shameless willingness to praise and support a person after their first shaky performance. They did the rest. Anybody can be a leader. A good community organization provides a lot of people with a lot of opportunities to practice, to try it out, to learn by doing. A broad team of folks who can lead is built by constantly bringing new people into leadership roles and supporting them in learning from this experience.

Rule five: The most important victory is the group itself. This starts a series of rules about winning. Winning is what organizing is about. Winning without building is a hollow process, though. We need to celebrate the simple fact of survival, given the odds most groups face. The

way to ensure that a group is built out of activity on issues is to create a structure that governs the group and bring people who work on issues into the governance of the group. In a mature organization this happens through elections, and the elections should at least bring new people in, even if they are not contests where folks vie for the votes to outdo their 'opponents'. A growing organization should pay close attention to this as well, through steering committees or leadership meetings where folks who are mostly involved in issues get brought into the deliberations on priorities, strategies, structure and the 'business' of the group. Even if they choose to say no, the opportunity to join in setting the course of the group makes it more their own. A group that is governed by one set of folks and involves a whole different set as beneficiaries or volunteers is never going to be a real people's organization. No empowerment ever comes from well meaning outsiders helping the helpless.

Rule six: Sometimes winning is losing. Remember in our initial discussion of the process of organizing we talked about the FWFWFLFH method. A group that never loses is probably just too naive or nearsighted to understand what's happening. Part of the political literacy that community organizing ought to impart is the ability to stare the facts in the face and understand that the politician who just talked for twenty minutes didn't really mean that he supports us - he really said he wasn't going to do what we want. Beyond this, we need to be careful that we ask for something we really want. A community organization that I worked with in Providence once undertook a two year campaign to open up membership in the United Way to more minority and non-traditional agencies. One result was that the group itself became a member agency! We thought this was the ultimate victory! No more spaghetti suppers, no more grant writing, no more scratching around for free paper for the mimeo - easy street. When a big Federal grant came down for anti-crime organizing, all other fundraising ground to a halt, everybody got a raise, the group bought a van and moved into a nice office. The dark side soon surfaced, though. The highly motivated but formerly low paid staff started to get resistance from leadership when it came time to challenge the real power brokers downtown - these folks are big in the United Way! We're going to be cutting our own throats! Leaders started to bid for the job openings, which now were much more lucrative - and those who didn't get hired felt that they had been put down unfairly, and stopped volunteering - if their fellow leader was now going to get to take home all that money, well he could make the phone calls! The final straw was the fight over the van. Who gets to drive it home at night - the new director of the anticrime project or the president - the fight was vicious and bitter, and the staff that thought they'd signed on for a crusade left in disgust, and the organization took a two year nosedive, leading to de-funding by the United way and death. This group thought they wanted respectability and acceptance, and were willing to pay any price to get them. In the end, they lost their power and they lost their integrity, and finally they lost their very existence.

Rule Seven: sometimes winning is winning. Most community organizations take on little slices of the problems that confront their community. The achievements seem insignificant, and the progress seems so slow! A good organizer knows how to build a sense of power and accomplishment, while not ignoring the problems that still remain to be solved. Every group has a cynic, who says 'okay, we got a million for our loan program. There's still vacant buildings out there we won't be able to fix!' This can lead to discouragement. Nobody can fight day after day without some hope, and acknowledging the victories along the way builds that hope. The East Toledo Community Organization fought for three years to get a new road built to open up the

industrial potential of the area. There were plenty of reasons to complain about what we didn't get - no job guarantees from new industry, no required hiring of neighborhood folks on the road construction. The victory was that we got a ten million dollar road built, though, and we worked very hard to let the whole community - inside East Toledo and outside - know that that's what we wanted, and that's what we got. This rule - know when to stop and claim the win - leads very directly to the ninth, but that's not coming until after the next one.

Rule Eight: If you're not FIGHTING for what you want, you don't want enough. We've talked before about the purpose of community organizing - building power. It's a lot like lifting weights. If you stay with the little baby weights, you'll never get the strength to do really heavy work. Community organizers know that it's possible to keep busy doing stuff and still get nowhere. It's possible to define your goals by what's achievable, and look like you're succeeding. The tragedy is that a group that never defines a difficult goal will never achieve a meaningful accomplishment. This extends, in the arena of power, to conflict, which we've talked about before. For now, remember the rule and check up on your group to make sure **SOMEBODY** thinks you're too strong, too forceful, too demanding, too abrasive. That probably means you're getting close to where the real power is.

Rule Nine: celebrate! I once ordered a young organizer in a new group to find some excuse and hold a victory party within a week or face firing! This young woman could only see the tough part - the half empty glass. She was starting to infect the neighborhood leadership with this negativity, and the group was sinking fast. Much to her surprise and delight (it saved her job), when she started talking to leaders, they came up with lots of reasons to celebrate! They wrote a VICTORY flyer, organized a block party with a cookout and games and awards, and turned the whole spirit of the group around - now they were winners! Everybody wants to be with a winner!

Finally - rule number ten: have fun! I started organizing with an all business attitude that looked at a meeting as being over when the gavel fell, and at the hanging out and laughing and drinking coffee afterwards as a distraction and a waste of time. I missed the community part of community organizing. These people were building a community, and sharing their fears, their hopes and their vision of the future over a beer at the club after the action was just as important as the planning meeting. I learned that meals and birthdays and Christmas parties and the summer picnic are organizing too. I learned that the posters that got made in the office with pizza and pop by the gang of volunteers we could scare up on a Friday night were far more important to the organization than the same posters made separately in peoples' homes. I learned that using humor to embarrass a public official brought a feeling of power to our folks that straight, serious conversation about our rights and their responsibilities could never come close to. I learned the power of FUN! and I vowed to try to make organizing at least as much fun as TV.

DEFINING AN ACTION STRATEGY

Every group should plan. This is not to say that things don't change, and often in ways that have not been anticipated. Real community organizing, though, is an educational process of action and reflection that puts people into the power game as players. Planning should be a participatory

process, then. A leadership group, with staff participation if there is an organizer on board, should plan out the strategy and steps on an issue.

First, the issue is defined, the goals for the campaign set, and the target selected. All these three factors are interrelated. As we discussed in the section on choosing and cutting an issue, there needs to be careful calculation involved, but finally the group needs to settle on their best guess as to just how broadly to define the issue, and on what to go for and who to go after.

Generally, the best plan has one target, a person who could take action to deliver what the group wants. This person needs to be within reach - a Toledo group shouldn't build its whole plan around getting somebody in New York to make a decision, but rather should find a local target that they can put pressure on in a variety of ways. The more you know about the target, the more you can develop pressure tactics.

In developing a plan, look to cover the 'what ifs.' There are usually three possible outcomes to any plan. If you've invited the mayor to your meeting, either he'll come or he won't come or he'll send somebody else to represent him (a variation on #2, but we'll call it a third alternative). The planning group needs to talk about what the groups' response will be in all three eventualities. If the mayor comes, how will he be welcomed, where will he sit, how many minutes will he be given, will we let him talk first or only in response to our questions, will he stay for the next part of the meeting or should we ask him to leave - all these questions need to be dealt with. If he doesn't come, when will we know, and is there anything we could/should do to get him to change his mind, like maybe an action at city hall or at the golf course? If they send a representative, who will it be, and do we accept him/her or not? In the same way, there are three possible responses from the mayor to our demands - yes, no or mushy/maybe. If he says yes, can we pin him down to a specific and enforceable commitment, and if he says yes right away, is there any follow-up that we should ask for while he's in an agreeable mood? If we get an outright no, do we have any recourse, or a fallback position? Can we get the mayor to recommend that somebody else do something instead? Can we lay out our next step, that will try to change his mind? Who will be chairing the meeting at that point, and can we get some mileage out of a no, with booing and hissing and so on, rather than just roll over and play dead? Finally, if the mayor says maybe/mushy, can the chair characterize this as a no, to push the mayor to a clearer yes statement? Can we pin the mayor down on the next step, so we know when the maybe/mushy might be converted to a yes or no? In fact, the planning group needs to talk about the fact that most maybe/mushy answers really mean NO, and they can be prepared to reject this kind of answer. A planning group could review peoples' experience with meetings and agreements and talk about just what constitutes a yes or a no. It's especially important to be prepared with your next step, so that a no or a maybe/mushy doesn't end the meeting, but rather you can announce that we'll all be down at council on Tuesday to protest this lack of cooperation, or we'll be calling for a new state law requiring the city to do this, starting on Monday with a press conference, or whatever...

In developing the plan, never make empty threats. Threats are very valuable, but if once you are unable to make good on them, your credibility will be weakened for a long, long time. I worked with a neighborhood organization in the Black community in Providence, Rhode Island in the early '70's. They were concerned about the lack of good jobs for young people. A group of

leaders had identified the beer distributor that was located in the heart of the area as a particularly bad actor, with lots of minority beer drinkers but no minority drivers, warehouse personnel or sales staff. We held a long series of revival style planning sessions, invited the company to a public meeting that they ignored and declared a boycott on Narragansett beer, statewide. I was excited - this was my first organizing job, and already we're taking on the big guys, big time. Unfortunately, boycotting Narragansett beer in Rhode Island is like trying to boycott air. It's a great target, but we didn't have the troops to carry it off. The first night, 30 of the 100 folks who signed up at the meeting to come and picket showed up. We downsized our plan - less pickets, less stores - and went out anyway. The next night, only ten arrived. We did one store. The third night, only the picket leader and me were there.

We were demoralized. I went to my Director, a legendary organizer, trained in Chicago. What's wrong with these people, why don't they want to fight? He pointed out, in language clear and straightforward (that better be the last time, or you're out) that I was looking in the wrong place for blame. As the organizer, it was MY job to design a campaign that could work, so if it wasn't working I should try to figure out why, and fix the plan, not blame the people...He led me through an analysis that identified the weak points of the plan. First, the group was made up largely of people who cared in general terms about getting more and better jobs for minority neighborhood residents, but very few actual job seekers, so the self interest was weak, and the commitment level low. Second, the tactic of a boycott is a long term, people-intense one, requiring a vast network of willing workers, and likely to succeed when there are lots of alternate products that folks could use. Narragansett was the cheapest brand, the locally produced brands, and held intense brand loyalty - tough to take on. In the end, we developed a quick and dirty approach to saving the campaign - and the reputation of the group. We did a week of outreach with a flyer that said, "Need a job? Come to the Meeting!" We took actual applications from people, explaining that we would turn them all over to the company at a certain time and in a group. We sent a letter demanding that the company meet us, in the street in front of their place, at noon on Friday. We called all the original leaders, and all the job applicants, and got a hundred folks there. The leaders presented a package of applications and a list of demands: accept these applications and pledge to give everybody an equal chance at all your job openings and we'll call off the boycott. Refuse at your peril! Needless to say, the media loved it, the company bought it and the organization declared a victory and got the heck out of the issue. A number of folks actually got jobs, too, and my career was preserved, with a difficult lesson learned.

Plan to build on the reaction from the other side. One of our most successful campaigns grew from an almost disastrous failure, through taking advantage of the reaction. Parents at the Southside Elementary were concerned about cars speeding by the playground. They were interested in a little activism, but not much. They asked our help in developing a petition for speed limit signs, and I met with a committee and urged them to make an appointment to deliver the petitions to the traffic engineer as a group. They agreed, made the appointment, and got the petitions signed. I arrived at the school at 3 pm on the appointed day, to find not five parents but only one - a short, meek, VERY pregnant mother who was also very reluctant to go alone to a big city office and talk to the official city traffic guy. As I had her in the car already, she found herself at the door of the city office before she could convince me to take her home and just mail the petitions. "While we're here, we might as well keep the appointment." The traffic engineer, a young, brash Italian-American, proceeded to treat Mrs. M like dirt. He made us wait, he

dismissed her concerns as unimportant, he didn't offer her a chair, he said the petitions probably wouldn't make a difference, he generally disregarded and disrespected the whole situation. In the car, on the way home, I agitated Mrs. M mercilessly. "Did you hear the way he talked to you? The nerve of this guy, who pays his salary, anyway! I'll bet he wouldn't treat a white person that way! And you six months pregnant! doesn't he have any manners?" I urged her to call the four other ladies who couldn't make it, and tell them the story. I asked her to call the neighborhood leadership and tell them the story as well, and ask for a few minutes on the agenda of the next area public meeting. By the time she'd told the story a half dozen times, and those folks had told it a few more, it came back to me as a physical attack, with racist slurs! The issue took off like a rocket - it led to a public meeting with 75 parents and over 100 children, and a hit on the installation dinner of the traffic engineer as the Grand Master of the Masons' lodge...but that's another story.

Finally, when a meeting is designed to get an agreement from a person, the meeting should be structured to tie that agreement down, tight. Two tried and true techniques for this are the written agreement and the report card. Often, an official or a target can be asked to sign a written agreement that embodies the demands. If they do, you know that their answer is really yes. If they don't sign, they will usually get much more specific about what they DO mean, and sometimes will sign a revised version so you know what they ARE agreeing to. The other approach is to post a list of demands, with a check-off spot marked YES and another for NO. This gives the chair a technique for concentrating the target on a specific answer that goes beyond "I'll do my best". The meeting can be focused around the list of demands very simply with either of these methods.

Evaluating the success of your effort is a critical part of any organizing campaign. Don't wait until the end to find out if you were effective. As you carry out your strategy and tactics, assess and evaluate your efforts. One approach is to have the group members answer the following three questions:

1. Is our strategy achieving the desired results--are we closer to the goal?
2. What's working, what isn't?
3. Are our tasks (actions) working--are they helping the group gain support?

An evaluation of the strategy and its results may lead a group to conclude that the reason why they have not met their goal is that the strategy was not fully developed. For example, the "target" of the group's efforts may not have had the power to make the change the group sought, or perhaps the timing of the campaign was not right; or a group may conclude that the strategy and tactics used were correct but not sufficient in number or frequency.

If your assessment indicates that your strategy is not working, you may need to revise your approach. Re-evaluating and changing tactics is completely acceptable. The bottom line for assessing success is: Did your efforts create the change you wanted? You will want to know what might the group do differently next time. Knowing what worked can help in planning your next organizing campaign.