To the unorganized.
May they join together
and
raise some hell!
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*Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven*

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Foreword

Richard Cloward died in 2001. These comments are modestly revised and updated from the introduction originally written by Cloward and Piven for the 1984 edition of this book.

The publication of this clear and thoughtful book on community organizing strategy by an experienced organizer is an important event. Community organizing, like all organizing, is about the struggle for a measure of power by people who ordinarily have little power. Those struggles have not fared well in the past few decades, and power inequalities are widening. As we mobilize to reverse those trends, it is important to learn what we can from those whose lives have been devoted to redressing the grievances of people at the bottom. Lee Staples is such a person, a uniquely gifted organizer with the talent to explain just what it is that community organizers try to do.

In the contemporary world, the crucial criterion by which to evaluate community organizing strategies as power strategies is the extent to which decentralized organizing can influence the increasingly centralized constellations of economic and political power that delimit the conditions under which people live. It hardly needs saying that if people organize to demand jobs or to demand better working conditions or to reduce environmental hazards, they are organizing to influence institutional processes that are ultimately determined by national and multinational corporations, and by the policies of the federal government and the new multinational superstructures that regulate the global economy. And if they organize to protest foreign aggression, they are organizing to change the military policies of the national government and its international allies.

But if the decisions that shape our lives are national and international, community organizing is by definition and by necessity local. Ordinary
people have always been moved to political action in the local settings where they live and work. It is in local settings that ordinary people form solidarities, that they discover their shared grievances, and where they sometimes find sources of institutional leverage. What people can do in politics is a reflection of their particular objective and local circumstances: as workers, they can withhold labor; as tenants, they can withhold rent; as savers, they can withhold savings; as consumers, they can withhold purchases; and as citizens, they can withhold obedience to the rules governing civil society.

The skill of the organizers cannot overcome the constraints of localism; it can only discover the opportunities for bringing people together and for using what power resources they have, opportunities that are buried in local institutional relationships and routines. Whether people band together as tenants, workers, minority members, women, or environmental activists, it is largely their neighborhoods, factories, housing projects, schools, and churches that provide the nexus for mobilization. Terminology should not mislead us. In this respect, community organizing is not different from other efforts to organize popular power.

At first glance, the juxtaposition of local organizing with the nationalization and internationalization of economic and political power appears to render local efforts weak or even futile. There are two typical responses by organizers. One is to turn to efforts to build national instead of local organization. The other is to call for the decentralization of economic and political decision making so as to make it accessible to local organizations.

Neither strategy stands up to scrutiny. If the solidarities and leverage that underlie the possibilities of popular power are yielded by the local institutions in which ordinary people play important roles, then popular power can only be organized locally. Concentrating on the development of the formal apparatus of a national organization is no substitute for the mobilization of these local resources. At best, national organization can encourage the spread of local protests and perhaps coordinate them, but they are not themselves a source of much influence. At worst, efforts to build national organizations become an exercise in illusion.

As for overcoming the limits of local organizing by calling for the decentralization of economic and political institutions, that is like spitting into the wind. Organizers should know better than anyone that such solutions, like all solutions, depend first on power, and not the other way round.

In any case, we think it is wrong to conclude that economic and political centralization have made local organizing futile, for local mobilizations can sometimes have powerful reverberations on national power. The problem is to identify the strategies by which local protest can influence centralized institutions. In the 1930s, the industrial workers’ movement won large concessions from the Roosevelt administration as a result of an
unprecedented wave of locally organized industrial strikes. The resulting loss of production threatened Roosevelt's national program for economic recovery, and that in turn jeopardized his electoral majority. Only when thus pressed did Roosevelt throw his support behind the legalization of collective bargaining, for example. And the pressure was the result of the local mobilization of the strike power of workers. In sum, local organizing gained for workers a measure of national political power.

The southern civil rights movement provides an example of a different kind of strategy by which local resources were mobilized for national influence. In this case, the critical leverage was gained by generating sharp divisions in a national electoral coalition. When civil rights demonstrators provoked outbreaks of police and mob violence in hundreds of southern cities, they galvanized large sectors of American public opinion. The effects on the national Democratic Party were devastating. On the one hand, die-hard white southern segregationists bolted from the party, joining neopopulist political movements and eventually settling down in the ranks of a born-again Republican Party, thus eroding Democratic strength in what had once been the solid South. But, on the other hand, the civil rights movement also generated enormous support among large numbers of northern black and white voters, thus posing an urgent dilemma for the Democratic leadership. If the party failed to respond to the movement, northern defections would accelerate; and when it did respond, southern white defections accelerated. Democratic leaders finally and reluctantly moved to resolve the dilemma by enacting the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 that enfranchised southern blacks, thereby producing millions of new Democratic supporters in the South that at least partially offset the loss of southern whites.

These experiences suggest, in contrast to the usual wisdom, that centralization may, under some conditions, actually increase the potential leverage of local protests. It was, after all, not until American industry had consolidated that the disruptive strikes of industrial workers exerted sufficient economic and political leverage to force national concessions. And it was only when American blacks left the local communities of the rural South for the big cities in the big states with large electoral votes that they were able to exert leverage on the national Democratic Party. Nor do we think these instances are anomalous. The insular and decentralized village life of the past did not ordinarily yield people at the bottom power. Rather, it has only been as the villages and towns of the world came to play a role in increasingly centralized and interdependent national and international systems that villagers and townspeople, from Islamic peasants to Polish workers to Druse tribes, could even hope to exert some influence on the national and international dynamics that shaped their lives.

If this is so, if local organizing can reverberate on power concentrations at the center, the task of the organizer is to identify the strategies that make...
local resources more threatening, more effective in exerting influence on centralized institutions. Why, at a particular time and under particular economic or political circumstances, and with particular constituencies and goals in mind, is it better to pursue this strategy rather than that one? There are certainly enough failed efforts to analyze, and a good many successful ones too. Every mode of local organizing can be evaluated in these terms, whether protests over gentrification or stoplights or redlining or plant closings or welfare cutbacks. The task is to see what resources people have, to see how those resources can be mobilized, and to trace the reverberations of those protests on institutional arrangements that may, or may not, channel the disturbances upward. The effectiveness of local organizing depends on the answers to such questions.

Organizers in fact do this kind of analysis. They think about strategy, and they reflect on their successes and failures. The knowledge they acquire is valuable. But ordinarily, they do not commit what they learn to writing. The consequence is that one organizing venture after another is initiated, runs its course, and fades, leaving little trace of what people tried to do and how they tried to do it. Knowledge about power strategies does not accumulate. The limitations that result are serious.

The importance of this book is that it contributes to the beginning of an accumulation of knowledge about power. Such an accumulation makes possible comparisons from a variety of organizing settings. A peace movement is not organized in the same way that a welfare rights or squatters’ movement or a citizens' action movement or a movement to protest farm foreclosures is organized. In each case, organizers usually have considerable insight into what they have done. But generalizations are limited because power strategies in one setting are not compared with power strategies in other settings.

The resulting particularism also encourages doctrinaire outlooks on organizing. Organizers become schooled mainly in the perspectives emerging from the particular organizing ventures in which they are involved, and do not learn much about strategies implemented elsewhere. This is less true of career organizers who have been involved in different organizing efforts. But most organizers are young, their experience limited to a few undertakings, and they tend to treat what they have learned as general rules or doctrines.

The accumulation of knowledge about strategy is also inhibited by the fact that there is little continuity in most organizing, so that most of what is learned in particular organizing efforts is simply lost, not even communicated orally to new generations of organizers. One reason is simply that many organizing ventures fail and are abandoned. Another, more important reason is that organizing is inspired by the historical conditions that produce mass unrest. Since those conditions ebb and flow, so do organizing possibilities. In some periods, as was true in the 1930s and
1960s, enormous political energy is released at the grassroots. People are ready for action and, sensing that, potential leaders and organizers emerge in large numbers. But these periods of possibility are typically followed by reaction, as in the 1950s and in the decades that followed the 1960s. Activism declines; organizing ventures and organizers are fewer. These interruptions also interrupt the transmission of knowledge about organizing.

The result is clear. When mass unrest again emerges, a new generation of organizers, lacking an orienting literature, cannot learn about past efforts. The number of would-be organizers suddenly expands, and they set out to mobilize people as if they were the first to venture upon the terrain. New organizing drives are begun, entirely untempered by previous experience. Discontinuities thus have the consequence that organizing is often undertaken by novices, both in the sense that organizers are inexperienced and in the sense that they are untutored by an orienting literature. In effect, much of the craft of organizing is constantly reinvented.

This is a great drawback. Organizers deal with the most central facts of social life: patterns of domination and of challenges to domination. To initiate an organizing project is to make a statement about why particular people at a particular time may be ready to challenge power, how they can go about doing that, and why they should. This statement is rarely simple, but it is crucial. Saul Alinsky said organizers must rub raw the sores of discontent, but that does not tell us which sores, or whose sores, or how to inflame them, or what to suggest people should do when they are ready to move into action. Every organizing effort confronts these questions, and success depends upon the answers. Were those most active in the J. P. Steven’s strike (1976–1980) longtime workers or new workers? Were they older workers whose working conditions had deteriorated, or who had begun to think of their working conditions and traditional wages as intolerable in a period of unprecedented prosperity? Or were the activists younger workers who had absorbed new and higher expectations and were less constrained by the responsibilities of family and mortgage and credit debt?

Since the reciprocal play of power is the essence of organizing, every organizing venture is based on suppositions about how the actions available to people in their daily life can be translated into a concrete strategy for the exercise of influence by given groups at a particular time. Efforts at influence will provoke responses, and organizers also have to anticipate the very specific strategies through which countervailing power will be exerted. Then, too, people must be ready to believe that they have a reasonable chance to prevail in the contest. Each of us is a political analyst: not just those who propose defiant action, but also those who must risk it. People imagine the contest, think about the interplay of power, and anticipate the consequences of their actions. The analysis of power proposed by organizers
must fit the sense people already have of how the world works, or they will not join in the power challenge. Southern blacks could not have been moved to conduct civil disobedience in the South of the 1920s; they would have recognized the futility of it, and known about the lynchings they risked. But institutions change, and so does the balance of power. Agricultural modernization, migration, urban concentration, and other socioeconomic transformations released people from old structures of domination and created new possibilities for power from below. People sense these changes, and when they do, the call to action makes sense in a way it would not otherwise. And good organizers sense what people know.

These are some of the reasons that this book is important. Lee Staples brings to his discussion of strategy a career as a community organizer, beginning with the welfare rights movement of the 1960s and including the community-based struggles of working-class people in the years since, exemplified by the work of organizations like Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). To be sure, there is much that the book is not about. It is not about the organizing strategies that grow out of the labor movement, or of the civil rights and women’s movements, or of the global justice movement. Each of these movements also developed strategies reflecting the particularities of their issues, their constituencies, their targets, and their opportunities for political leverage. The global justice and contemporary antiwar movements in particular broke new ground with their innovative use of the Internet, and their invention of new ways of structuring movements. But that is not what this book is about. Rather, the value of this book is that it is an exemplary exposition of the knowledge and skills that grow out of community organizing. If the craft of organizing is to develop, we need to become more self-conscious about the different strategies for challenging power that are appropriate to different local constituencies under different local conditions. And we need to consider carefully why some strategies succeed in making an impact on structures of national and even international power, and why other strategies fail. Lee Staples has made a major contribution to that effort.

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Preface:
From Roots to Tips

This is a how-to-do-it book about grassroots community organizing. It presents strategies and tactics, methods and techniques that community members can use to take collective action in response to problems, hopes, concerns, visions, and dreams for a better future that arise from everyday situations. It defines grassroots organizing and delineates the key aspects of this process, articulating fundamental principles and goals; presents turf, issue, identity, and workplace arenas where organizing takes place; and introduces both community development and social action approaches to social change.

The book lays out organizing models and methods for building effective vehicles of collective empowerment, offers guidelines for choosing issues, and examines the elements of a successful issue campaign. It explores the roles of members, leaders, and organizers. And it focuses on ongoing activities such as recruitment, meetings and actions, leadership development, action research, negotiations, press relations, lobbying, and working with other groups. Hopefully, this book covers the full gamut, branching out from a discussion of root principles for developing and exercising collective power to specific tips for effective organizing methods and techniques.

Organizing is based on the notion that ordinary people can and should join together to gain more control over their life conditions. Together, people set their own goals and take collective action to help themselves. There’s a bottom-up process involving large numbers of the affected constituency in envisioning, planning, executing, and evaluating campaigns for social change. The act of organizing is an article of faith in people’s collective power, wisdom, competence, and judgment to bring about progressive change. As ACORN’s motto states, “The People Shall Rule.”

The first six chapters of this book flow directly from my own experience as an organizer, supervisor, staff director, trainer, educator, evaluator,
consultant, and coach. Starting in 1968, I worked for the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) in Ohio, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. People such as Bruce Thomas, George Wiley, and Bill Pastreich provided both inspiration and some solid training. I specialized in building new groups and was involved in thirteen different organizing drives. There also were plenty of direct actions and responsibilities for training new staff. All this gave me a chance to work with a wide variety of people in a number of different settings.

In 1970, I moved to Los Angeles to study and work with Warren Hagstrom. I organized deinstitutionalized mental health consumers/survivors/ex-patients living in halfway houses and, later, women doing family daycare in their homes. I also did neighborhood organizing in low-income areas of San Pedro and South Central Los Angeles. I learned a lot from Kris Ockershauser, Howard Uller, and Mickey Weinberg.

In 1973, I moved back to Massachusetts and together with former NWRO colleagues Barbara Bowen and Mark Splain helped start Fair Share, an organization of low- and moderate-income people. This was a multi-issue, multiconstituency membership organization with local chapters all across the state. I worked there for five years, serving as a regional staff director in both the metropolitan Boston area and in Worcester. Fellow staff members such as Jim Katz, Judy Meredith, and Neil Sullivan and leaders like Mike Regan, Natalie Schneiderman, and Carol Gillis helped make this experience exciting, fun, and successful.

Following Fair Share, I directed Massachusetts WAGE, an effort to organize for jobs and better working conditions for people in the secondary labor force. During this time, I began teaching part-time at Boston University School of Social Work (BUSSW). Ultimately, I became a full-time faculty member at BUSSW, where I’ve taught courses in community organizing for more than twenty-five years. However, I have managed to keep involved in grassroots community organizing during this entire period. Many different experiences have shaped my thinking, but I will mention some key ones.

For three years, I was Lead Trainer for ACORN’s Institute for Social Justice. This enabled me to work with a wide variety of “clients” across the country, including environmental organizations, students, Legal Services, poverty programs, food groups, and numerous low-income and minority organizations. That experience broadened my thinking and gave me a new sense of perspective.

For seven years, I served for two days a week as an organizing consultant with the Committee for Boston Public Housing and had the opportunity to work with some terrific staff members and tenant leaders, including Pat Alvarez, Liz Araujo, Edna Bynoe, Tess Browne, Charlotte Dickson, Geneva Evans, Cheryl Granum, Thelma Hyatt, Carol Katz, Mary Lassen, Bart McDonough, Barbara Melon, Robyn Michaels, Daniel Moss,
Steve Schnapp, Mary Ellen Smith, Phoebe Soares, Barbara Wallace, and Geoff Wilkinson.

Over the past two decades, I have assisted both M-POWER (Massachusetts People Organized for Wellness Empowerment and Rights) and the Massachusetts Clubhouse Coalition—organizing efforts to assert and protect the rights of deinstitutionalized mental health consumers/survivors/ex-patients. It’s been a pleasure to work with such talented people as Deborah Anderson, Denie Cohodas, Pat Deegan, Deborah Delman, Jim Shaw, Reva Stein, and Ann Stillman.

For about a five-year period, I served as a consultant and faculty member with the Center for Community Responsive Care, an exciting and innovative multidisciplinary training program combining public health and community organizing. The outstanding staff included Ann Aaberg, Suzanne Cashman, Hugh Fulmer, Gretchen Kinder, Phoebe Soares, and Sharon Tippo.

Over the past six years, I’ve made a half-dozen trips to Croatia, and one to Bosnia, to do community-organizing training with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). I’m sure that I’ve learned as much as I have taught, if not more. It’s been exciting and rewarding to work with dedicated people such as Mirela Despotovic, Mladen Djurkinjak, Milan Medic, David Shimkus, Igor Stojanovic, and Pero Vrucinic at such organizations as the Center for Civil Initiatives, International Rescue Committee, and Open Society Institute.

The Chelsea Collaborative is working on a range of issues, including immigrant rights, environmental justice, and affordable housing. The collaborative skillfully combines social action, community development, and community building; I’ve had the pleasure of working with some wonderful staff and community leaders, including Roseann Bongiovanni, Lucia Colon, Leslie Dominguez, Ed Marakovitz, Anita McCandless, Gladys Vega, and Juan Vega.

I’ve been fortunate to cross paths with other individuals who have influenced my thinking about and practice of community organizing over the years, including Moshe ben Asher, Amnon Boehm, Phil Clay, Bert De Leeuw, Gary Delgado, Melvin Delgado, Lew Finfer, Mike Gallagher, Frieda Garcia, Kit Hinga, Hubie Jones, Sarah Lange, Mel King, Joan Lancourt, Louis Lowy, Mike Miller, S. M. Miller, Wade Rathke, Miles Rapoport, Peter Rider, and Loretta Williams.

The above experiences and individuals, plus countless others, as well as colleagues at BUSSW and close to 2,000 students in classes that I have taught, all have contributed to what I’ve learned about grassroots community organizing over the past thirty-six years. And let there be no doubt about the intent of this book. My goal is to contribute to the stock of knowledge about effective organizing. I am hoping to put more tools for building power into the hands of the least powerful groups in this and other societies.
With more than 150,000 members in 7,000 neighborhood chapters organized in sixty-three cities across the United States (as this book goes to press), ACORN has a national strategy to do just that for low- and moderate-income people in both neighborhoods and workplaces. It needs to organize more people, and that takes money. Therefore, all proceeds from this book will be donated to ACORN. I urge people to buy this book, read it, and put the ideas into action—from the roots to the tips.
Acknowledgments: With a Lot of Help from My Friends

There is a growing body of knowledge about grassroots community organizing. It results from the accumulated direct experience and analysis of countless numbers of organizers and leaders. Certainly, any attempt to put a part of this information on paper borrows heavily from others. Very little in this book was developed exclusively by me. All I’ve attempted to do is to lay out some philosophy, knowledge, and techniques that can help people organize effectively for more power. While much of this material may not be original, I can testify from direct personal experience—it does work.

Certainly, I’ve been heavily influenced by the path-breaking organizing done by Fred Ross and by the strategic and tactical principles of Saul Alinsky. And the sometimes contrasting theories of Warren Haggstrom and those of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have shaped my thinking. I’ve also learned basic values and knowledge, as well as skills and techniques, from a wide range of organizers and leaders, especially in the Welfare Rights Movement, Massachusetts Fair Share, ACORN, Committee for Boston Public Housing, and the Chelsea Collaborative.

This is the second edition of this book, and it certainly stands on the shoulders of the first version. A number of friends and colleagues read early drafts of the original material and made helpful comments and suggestions that still inform this latest effort. Those people included Madeleine Adamson, Moshe ben Asher, Barbara Bowen, Richard Cloward, Michael Gallagher, Warren Haggstrom, Frances Piven, Wade Rathke, Tim Sampson, Mary Ellen Smith, and Mark Splain.

During the course of writing this second edition, I’ve called on a number of people to help with examples or to furnish information about various organizing campaigns, events, and situations, including Roseann Bongiovanni, Deanne Bonnar, Kit Hinga, Steve Kest, Ed Marakovitz, Reva
Stein, Ann Stillman, Gladys Vega, and Geoff Wilkinson. In Chapter 5, I’ve included much of the material from Anne Thogersen’s excellent monograph (2003), which describes M-POWER’s multiphase campaign for Informed Consent in the Massachusetts mental health system.

I’ve drawn many examples directly from the ACORN News, and therefore am indebted to both Camellia Phillips and David Swanson. Camellia also was immensely helpful in obtaining ACORN organizing drive materials from Peter Kuhns (see Appendix), answering numerous questions, and coordinating the production of the outstanding case study of ACORN’s Household campaign written by Maude Hurd and Lisa Donner. Madeleine Adamson gave much valuable advice about the inclusion of short how-to-do-it pieces for Chapter 7 and worked with Helene O’Brien to produce the article on dues and grassroots fundraising.

I also want to give my sincere and enthusiastic thanks to all the other contributors to Chapter 7—Dave Beckwith, Will Collette, Catherine Dunham, Mac McCreight, Judy Meredith, Terry Mizrahi, George Pillsbury, Maria Roberts-DeGennaro, Beth Rosenthal, Tim Sampson, Louise Simmons, Mark Splain, and Eric Weltman.

Colleagues, the administration, and the support staff at the Boston University School of Social Work have been helpful throughout this project. Dean Wilma Peebles-Wilkins and Macro Practice Chair Melvin Delgado have encouraged me to write the book and have helped smooth out technical problems. Suzanne Hogan, Secretary for my department, has been immensely helpful and always cheerful, despite having to assist with tedious activities, such as scanning text from the original precomputer edition and helping me with my ongoing technological incompetence. John Arrigo and Monica Bowen also bailed me out of numerous computer crises.

Hilary Claggett, senior editor at Praeger Publishers, has represented the publisher throughout this writing project and has been patient, informative, and supportive as I’ve moved forward. She has a good grasp of the principles and methods of grassroots organizing, which has enabled her to be especially helpful as the new book has come to fruition. She has demonstrated basic competence, flexibility, attention to detail, follow-through, and knowledge about the production process.

Finally, my wife Louise, son Josh, and daughter Becca have been especially understanding as I’ve hogged the computer, often been lost in thought, and generally been unavailable for large chunks of time during the whole writing process. Their love, support, and encouragement have been constant throughout a period when I’ve been overextended, under pressure, out of touch, incommunicado, uptight, and downright beside myself.
Chapter 1

“Power to the People”
Basic Organizing Philosophy and Goals

• A citywide coalition wins passage of a Living Wage Bill. The mayor signs off on legislation passed by city council after a long campaign including release of a low-income workers’ wage study, neighborhood meetings with district councilors, public hearings, a rally, and a march.

• Senior citizens confront the director of the local housing authority and receive a commitment that repairs will be made to more than 100 units containing severe violations of the state sanitary code.

• An environmental group in a low-income Latino community brings together seventy-five people to clean up marshlands that abut an abandoned shopping mall where they eventually plan to develop a mix of affordable housing, small shops, and open space.

• A LGBT organization succeeds in convincing the school board to adopt curriculum materials that are affirming of lesbian and gay students.

• An immigrants’ rights rally draws more than 500 people who then march three blocks to the state house, where they lobby individual legislators to pass a bill supporting driver’s licenses for immigrants.

• In a Croatian village, a youth group works to rehab an empty building that was bombed out during the war. With the blessing of the mayor—but no funding—they create a flourishing new youth center through their own labor.

• Mental health consumers/survivors/ex-patients win a tough campaign to force the state to adopt a bill of rights for anyone receiving services.

Each of the above examples entails grassroots community organizing: collective action by community members drawing on the strength of numbers, participatory processes, and indigenous leadership to decrease power disparities.
and achieve shared goals for social change. The key elements of this activity are embedded in the definition.

1. Community members make their own decisions about social change—what needs to be added, altered, or eliminated to make their lives better. There is a basic assumption that they have the right, necessity, and capacity to define their own goals and objectives, as well as to speak and act on their own behalf. The familiar slogan “Nothing about us without us” effectively captures this sentiment.* This approach requires faith in the judgment, intentions, abilities, and instincts of community members. Organizing isn’t a process whereby small groups of enlightened elites are brought together to formulate the “right” policies. To the extent that non-members advocate on behalf of the community (e.g., advocates for youth), the process is not organizing, and to the degree that self-advocacy takes place (e.g., youth act on their own interests), organizing is taking place. Organizing is a bottom-up philosophical approach to social change, not simply a method to achieve it.

2. Community members take collective action that employs “people power” to achieve shared goals, resolve common problems, and gain a greater measure of control over the circumstances of their lives. The person who acts alone has very little power. When people join together and organize, they increase their ability to get things done, and they often decrease power differentials with institutional decision-makers and dominant groups in society. Grassroots community organizing offers a means for power to be exercised through the strength of numbers, and also contributes toward the end of building social solidarity. Consequently, there’s heavy emphasis on inclusive processes maximizing opportunities for large numbers of people to participate in decisions, activities, and actions. Participatory processes that build community (how change is brought about) are given equal weight with product outcomes (what is accomplished).

3. The community provides its own leadership for the change effort. The operative assumption is that effective leadership should and will emerge from within the community, rather than from the outside—that the requisite strengths, assets, and resources to fulfill this function are present among the constituency. Organizing is not a “top-down” process. Nevertheless, capable leadership in a variety of forms and at different levels is essential if a community hopes to generate enough power to act successfully on its own interests. Grassroots community organizing is predicated on the power of numbers, but committed, competent indigenous leadership is needed to provide vision, critical analysis, inspiration, direction, and modeling for the full membership.

* I’m not sure who first coined this phrase, but most people attribute it to Jim Shaw, a mental health consumer/survivor activist from Lowell, Massachusetts.
Grassroots community organizing may occur when people work together on a single issue or project. For instance, residents might organize to fight a proposal to build a new highway that would run through the middle of their neighborhood. Or they might come together once a year to do a neighborhood cleanup. The criteria for the above definition could be met in both instances—there might be participatory goal setting and decision making, large numbers of community members taking collective action on their own behalf, and indigenous leadership. Obviously, power would be brought to bear to resist construction of the highway, but it also would be generated when neighborhood residents worked cooperatively on their annual cleanup project. Yet no permanent organizational structure would be built in either case.

Gary Delgado (1997) refers to such efforts as *single-issue mobilizations (SIMs)* and expands on the concept as follows:

Although they are the formations most commonly found in communities of color, SIMs are less “organizations” in the traditional sense and more ad-hoc committees that are mobilized around specific issues. In many communities these committees mobilize around crisis situations: an incident with the police; unfair suspension of children in schools; toxic poisoning. These organizations tend to be fundamentally different from other community organizations in a number of ways: a) they tend to have a fluid and informal leadership structure; b) their membership tends to ebb and flow in relationship to how “hot” an issue is; c) contrary to traditional community organizing, the objective for forming a SIM is not to develop an ongoing powerful organization that can generally advocate the interests of a constituency but to make specific demands from one institution at a specific point in time. However, in many communities, SIMs are the initial building block for developing organization. (p. 31)

Much of what follows throughout this book will be directly applicable to SIMs and, I hope, useful to anyone engaged in such efforts. I fully agree that SIMs are a very common, if not the *predominant*, form of organizing in many oppressed communities. Recognizing this phenomenon, my focus herein will not be on this type of “one-shot organizing.” Rather, the emphasis here will be on developing ongoing organizations as a *power base* through which community members can take collective action over time. This approach stems from an analysis that recognizes a continuous flow of problems, issues, and concerns facing most communities, especially those that have been disempowered or oppressed. Small issues are connected to bigger ones, which in turn are linked to still larger ones. There is no final issue. There is no ultimate campaign. So, the goal is not simply resolving particular problems and making specific improvements (although
that’s essential), but it is also developing an organizational structure through which community members consistently can act to challenge and change power disparities vis-à-vis a range of other groups, organizations, and institutions that impact their lives. Thus, a grassroots community organization (GCO) can be a vehicle of collective empowerment as distinct needs and opportunities arise.

**FOUR ARENAS AND TWO APPROACHES**

**Elemental Elements: Turf, Issue, Identity, and Workplace**

Grassroots community organizing usually is concentrated in four different arenas: turf, issue, identity, or workplace. Groups that organize by turf focus on a particular physical area, such as a neighborhood, housing development, electoral jurisdiction, church parish, business area, government zone, trailer park, colonista, or school district. Participation and membership usually are open to anyone living or working in the designated area. People from various constituency subgroups within this turf area may join the GCO, which in turn may work on a wide range of community issues. The initiatives may be close to the ground—cleaning up vacant lots, rehabbing abandoned housing units, registering people to vote, securing stop lights, getting new sidewalks, developing community gardens, connecting to sewers, obtaining school crossing guards—or more ambitious, such as challenging the lending policies of local banks, developing affordable housing, electing a candidate to office, improving access to health care, confronting neighboring corporate polluters, demanding better city services, promoting school reform, or engaging in comprehensive planning and redevelopment. Local groups also may join together at larger geographical levels, such as Detroit ACORN, Massachusetts Senior Action Council, or National People’s Action. As turf organizations enlarge their degree of scale, they increase their capacity to take on even bigger issues, such as a citywide Living Wage, establishment of a statewide prescription drug program for seniors, or a nationally coordinated, multifaceted campaign against predatory lending.

Other organizations will be formed to address specific issues, such as health care, education, taxes, housing, foreign policy, discrimination, or the environment. The unique concerns of various constituency subgroups (e.g., disabled people, ethnic populations, or lesbians and gays) will not be central to the GCO’s goals. Rather, a broad array of people will be recruited and activated around their interests relative to the particular issue. While such GCOs obviously will have a geographic element (e.g., a citywide housing group, a chapter of a statewide environmental association, a regional public health coalition, or the local arm of a national peace organization),
the locus isn’t the focus. Instead, the organizing centers around the particular issue.

The term *single-issue organizing* often is employed, but like so many terms, it is very imprecise. “Single-issue” efforts can run the gamut from a narrow one-shot attempt to prevent the closure of a neighborhood health clinic (a formal organization might not even be created); through a large scale, but singular, effort to pass legislation to protect uninsured children (some type of statewide organization almost is a necessity, but might be disbanded if a new policy were established); to a broad-based “permanent” organization concentrating solely on health care reform but working on a variety of subissues within this area, such as lack of access to treatment, community benefits from hospitals, excessive drug company profits, and universal health coverage. Given this wide range, throughout this book I’ll specify whether I’m describing single-issue efforts with clear ending points or ongoing organizing around a single-issue area.

Still other organizations are formed by constituency subgroups as *communities of identity* along dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, immigrant status, religion, and physical or mental disability. Examples might include a senior citizens’ group, a Vietnamese mutual assistance association, a lesbian/gay task force, or a social action organization of disabled people. While such groups will have a geographic location and may work on a range of issues, their primary focus and raison d’etre link to their members’ shared characteristics of identity. Over the past several decades there has been explosive growth in identity organizing. Much of this can be attributed to the failure of many turf and issue organizations to adequately address the interests and concerns of constituency subgroups within their membership. Since constituency group members often experience discrimination most directly and painfully along these very dimensions, they have frequently felt the need to organize separately to effectively challenge the oppression that so profoundly impacts their lives. Identity politics has fueled the civil rights, women’s, LGBT, and disability rights (physical and mental) movements and continues to be a primary focus for grassroots community organizing.

Finally, some groups also are organized around the *workplace*. Of course, the classic workplace organization is the labor union. There’s a long and strong history of labor organizing, both internationally and in the United States. This book will not attempt to address union organizing, which is distinct from grassroots community organizing. However, there are other types of efforts that combine turf, issue, or identity organizing with workplace issues. For instance, the Latino Immigrant Committee in Chelsea, Massachusetts, is composed primarily of newcomers from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, Chile, and Nicaragua. It organizes around identity issues related to the members’ immigrant status. When the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1445 began conducting
a union drive at a local meat-processing plant where many committee members work, the organizing was met by stiff and hostile resistance from the company’s owners. The Latino Immigrant Committee linked with Jobs for Justice and occupational safety groups to form the Solidarity Coalition, which organized a rally and march with more than 200 people, entered the factory with a delegation of workers and supporters, and confronted management.

Fine (2001) has described “community unionism,” which goes beyond community coalitions supporting union struggles and entails labor organizations collaborating with turf-based groups to work on issues outside the workplace. ACORN has worked closely with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) on a variety of campaigns around the nation. On the other hand, Delgado (1997) has pointed out that community-based initiatives organizing workers of color in both the workplace and the community have had varied experiences with unions, sometimes acting as “independent advocates for workers,” and in other instances operating to “pressure unions to deliver more equitable training/hiring programs for people of color.”

Many GCOs combine elements of turf, issue, identity, and workplace organizing. For instance, a welfare rights organization may be organized around both the issues affecting the lives of low-income people as well as their very identities as recipients of public assistance. A tenant association in a particular public housing development will have elements of turf, identity, and housing issues. Senior organizations may combine this same mix, while the aforementioned Latino Immigrants Committee blends identity and workplace issues. The lines sometimes may blur, making specific categorization difficult or impossible, and different elements may move to the foreground or the background, depending on particular circumstances. Nevertheless, these four arenas often have profound implications for organizing models and methods, as well as roles for leaders and organizers. They will be revisited at a number of points in the pages that follow.

**Two Routes To Power: Community Development and Social Action**

There are two major organizing approaches within these four arenas, Community Development and Social Action.* Both feature large numbers of participants taking collective action on their own behalf under the guidance of indigenous leadership. Each has a dual emphasis on participatory

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*The analysis that follows draws extensively on two of the three models in Rothman’s typology (1968, 1995), social action and locality development, although there are significant differences in my conceptualization of community development.*
processes and successful outcomes. And there is a common goal of developing effective organizational structures as vehicles for social change. But there are also important differences in goals relative to the redistribution of power, the types of strategies utilized, and appropriate roles in the change process for both community members and institutional decision-makers.

Community Development involves participants in constructive activities and processes to produce improvements, opportunities, structures, goods, and services that increase the quality of life, build individual and collective capacities, and enhance social solidarity. The developmental approach utilizes cooperative strategies and processes both internally and externally to address specific problems and to build the communal infrastructure (Rothman, 1968; Rubin and Rubin, 1992; Fisher, 1994; Shragge, 1997; Pantoja and Perry, 1998). The operative assumption is that the community needs to get itself together to bring about constructive change. This approach is developmental and integrative. Frequently, GCOs using the Community Development approach do not even interact with external institutions, concentrating on in-house solutions that highlight self-help and mutual aid. For instance, residents might come together to create a community garden or to organize a neighborhood crime watch without any direct contact with city hall or the police department. Such an approach may be a product of an exclusively internal focus. However, developmental methods also may spring from an analysis that external decision-makers are hostile to the community and that it’s counterproductive or dangerous to confront them. For instance, during segregation, African Americans often organized their own human services, schools, and health care in the face of institutional indifference and racist violence.

On the other hand, a GCO might employ collaborative or mildly persuasive strategies to enlist the public and/or private sectors as partners to develop affordable housing or to generate more employment opportunities. In each case, the work would be constructive and would emphasize cooperative relations, both within the community and vis-à-vis external institutions. The goal is internal development of the community’s capacity to make improvements, solve problems, generate its own leadership, strengthen social relationships, and function more effectively. Community Development operates within the existing constellation of power relationships and does not attempt to redistribute resources or to reduce power disparities. It is not adversarial or oppositional. Typically, the focus is at the local level (as its name implies), since there’s no effort to aggregate local GCOs as a power block to challenge outside institutions.

Community Development often is undertaken when social, political, and economic problems are viewed as products of anomie, weak communal relationships, insufficient civic engagement, and limited capacity for effective collective action. Some may see this community breakdown as the
result of external oppression aimed at particular identity groups or disinvestment in lower income neighborhoods by the public and private sectors. Others may focus more on the internal sources of community distress. Regardless of whether there is an external or internal emphasis on the factors destroying communal bonds, Community Development is not a classic “deficit model.”

Instead, there is an assumption that the affected community has the resiliency and strength to organize its own assets and resources to rebuild the social infrastructure and resolve its own problems. There is a strong emphasis on capacity building for both individuals—developing the individual skills of indigenous leaders and community members, as well as the community’s ability to organize successfully on its own behalf. This is best actualized through GCOs that have the ability to accomplish concrete goals through inclusive processes that involve large numbers of the affected constituency. These product and process dimensions are given equal weight. Strong emphasis usually is placed on building community connections, strengthening relationships among community members, and developing the social infrastructure. Therefore, typically Community Development has three goals: problem resolution (e.g., creating a community garden, organizing a neighborhood crime watch, producing affordable housing, or generating employment opportunities), capacity building through the establishment of effective GCOs, and the development of social solidarity—“the ties that bind.”

When used externally, it may be consistent with “consensus organizing,” where there is a perception that the community shares common interests with outside institutions or that “power holders could be organized to effect change” (Beck and Eichler, 2000). A developmental approach may be appropriate where there’s an assumption that sufficient resources already exist and simply need to be marshaled for change, or that “power can be grown,” eliminating the competition that inevitably arises under circumstances of scarcity. However, Community Development also may be used selectively without buying into this analysis. For example, a GCO might work collaboratively with city hall on a summer youth employment initiative at the same time that it wages a campaign to force the mayor to hire additional housing inspectors and crack down on slum landlords. A group also might make a tactical decision based on a strategic analysis not to challenge institutional power at a certain time or on a particular issue. For instance, there might be a decision to work in partnership with a local bank to develop a new community center, even though the organization has future plans to confront this financial institution regarding its lending practices. Therefore, I am laying out the essence of Community Development as an organizing approach, rather than as a philosophy of social change. Some GCOs may employ this approach based on fundamental assumptions about the nature and causes of community problems or on an analysis
that the interests of the “powers that be” are consistent with those of community members. Others will mix Community Development with Social Action according to their analysis of what needs to be done under particular circumstances.

Social Action brings people together to convince, pressure, or coerce external decision-makers to meet collective goals either to act in a specified manner or to modify or stop certain activities. This approach features strategies and tactics designed to alter the actions, behaviors, and attitudes of outside groups and institutions. For instance, a disability rights group might attempt to urge city officials to create curve cuts making all sidewalks more accessible for wheelchairs. Mental health consumers might push the state to change the guidelines for the Informed Consent Policy specifying the side effects of medications. Environmental activists might physically block dumpsters carrying industrial wastes to a landfill near a low-income, multiracial neighborhood. Like Community Development, there is strong emphasis on activating large numbers of the affected constituency to take collective action on their own behalf.

But Social Action strategies are adversarial because they are employed to make external decision-makers do what they otherwise would not do. Methods can range on a continuum from persuasion through disruption, depending on the level of resistance by those being targeted. And that resistance is a product of real or perceived conflicting interests between community members and external groups: How much tax money is the city willing to allocate for curve cuts? Do state officials really accept the idea that mental patients have the right and competence to question the professional judgment of their psychiatrists? Is the trucking company willing to forgo profits when confronted by charges of environmental racism and classism?

This approach usually is taken when there’s a perception of power disparities between dominant groups and constituency members. Those who lack power are placed in situations where they’re made to feel unimportant and unable to control basic decisions about their own lives. The process of organizing enables members of these less powerful groups to transform themselves from objects of oppression to subjects able to act in unison to challenge dominant elites (Freire, 1973). However, there is a further assumption that power holders will not willingly give up their advantages and privileges—that some level of conflict is inevitable whenever the status quo is contested.

In the famous words of Frederick Douglass, from “Letter to an Abolitionist Associate”: “This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will” (1853). And demands can be made best when people organize and take assertive collective action to pursue their interests. There is no attempt to “grow power” together with outside groups, but
rather a “zero-sum” contest whereby community members gain greater control over their lives at the expense of the prerogatives of external decision-makers. Unlike Community Development, which seeks to make improvements within existing relations of power, Social Action is redistributive in nature.

Adversarial Social Action usually ruffles the feathers of dominant groups, and a number of common responses often will be observed. At times, basic conflict tactics will be attacked as unnecessary and counterproductive, or as an obsolete holdover “from the sixties.” In other instances, the motivations and integrity of the GCO’s leadership and staff will be challenged. Predictably, even the existence of conflicting interests may be denied. To the extent that social problems are acknowledged at all, institutional decision-makers may suggest cooperative group strategies emphasizing technical solutions and mutual interests. But Social Action is based on an analysis that a particular issue cannot be resolved unless and until the existing balance of power is changed. Therefore, Social Action also has three goals—problem resolution (e.g., obtaining curve cuts, modifying the Informed Consent Policy, or eliminating illegal dumping), building a power base through the development of a strong GCO, and decreasing power disparities between community members and external groups.

Both Social Action and Community Development share the common goal of resolving concrete problems, but the former employs adversarial strategies to push external targets, while the latter takes a cooperative approach to find internal solutions. Both seek to develop GCOs as vehicles through which large numbers of constituency members can take collective action to improve their lives. However, each takes a very different route to power. The organization serves Community Development as a means through which participants can exercise power to work constructively to achieve their objectives, while in Social Action, the GCO is the instrument through which the organized membership can exert their power vis-à-vis other groups. Community Development places heavy emphasis on creating social solidarity and does not seek to change power relationships. Social Action has a primary focus on reducing power differentials. While it retains a rich tradition of “solidarity through struggle,” such unity is more a means of winning victories than an end in itself.

A simple example helps illustrate the distinction. Picture a vacant lot in a multiracial low-income neighborhood. The land—owned by the city—has become a dumping ground with old mattresses, furniture, appliances, and car parts littered across the full expanse. Weeds, broken glass, and patches of briars fill out the scene. Neighborhood residents come together in their GCO to develop a plan to clean up the lot and develop a minipark, complete with a community garden, play space for small kids, and a shady area with benches and tables.

A Community Development approach undoubtedly would entail a cleanup day, and perhaps there might be an effort to persuade the city to
provide some equipment, as well as a truck to remove the debris. But the actual work would be done by residents themselves. The cleanup and subsequent land development might increase the GCO’s active membership, develop new leaders, establish a cooperative working relationship with city officials, and enhance the group’s power to accomplish its goals. The entire effort might build a sense of neighborhood pride and develop the community’s social infrastructure as folks worked together and built relationships. Public officials probably would do little to clean up the other five city-owned lots in this same neighborhood, but the residents might be inclined to replicate this project.

On the other hand, a Social Action approach might begin with door-to-door recruitment, “rubbing raw the sores of discontent” (Alinsky, 1969) by engaging residents in agitational conversations about the city’s failure to provide adequate management of this parcel of land. The local situation might be compared with the beautiful miniparks the city recently established in a white upper-middle-class neighborhood on the other side of town. A campaign would be undertaken to force city officials to clean up their act, as well as this lot. Tactics might include a media tour comparing the two neighborhoods, release of a report documenting city park expenditures in the two areas, and a large face-to-face meeting with the mayor in a local church across the street from the vacant lot. Like the Community Development effort, a successful social action campaign also would increase the GCO’s active membership and develop new leaders. Relationships would be strengthened as the group struggled to overcome the city’s resistance, but the solidarity and ownership would be different if the park department did the work as opposed to the residents themselves. However, a victory most likely would shake up city hall and earn the grudging respect of public officials, increasing the GCO’s reputation as a force to be reckoned with and improving its ability to deal with the other five lots, as well as other community issues.

Of course, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive and various combinations could be used. For instance, if the group decided to take the developmental route and do the cleanup themselves, they might be rebuffed when they asked city officials for equipment and the use of a truck. Social Action to secure the city’s cooperation might follow. Or, under a different scenario, if Social Action initially failed to secure a commitment from the city, the GCO might up the ante, cleaning the lot themselves in a highly publicized community action and then dumping all the debris on the front lawn of city hall. The lines also may blur when community members engage in Social Action in order to get a seat at the table in a developmental process that they don’t entirely control. Here the goal is to involve the constituency as full partners in participatory planning, design, implementation, and evaluation.
Limits and Possibilities

The most basic goal of grassroots community organizing is to bring about social change. While Community Development can be a viable method for making local improvements, its potential is more limited as a strategy to bring about deeper structural change at the city, state, regional, national, or international levels. One reason is simply a matter of scale. This approach is geared for the internal development of small community units, not transforming larger social systems. The organizing focuses on building the community from within, and there’s little attention beyond a very local orientation. Larger systemic change simply isn’t on the radar screen.

Even more fundamentally, the more ambitious the proposed change, the more likely that strong resistance will emerge from dominant groups who benefit from the status quo. It’s one thing to convince city officials to let residents in a low-income neighborhood create a community garden on an empty parcel of land, but quite another to set aside five downtown acres that are being eyed by big developers. An HMO may be willing to partner with a GCO to establish a community-based diabetes screening program, but the insurance industry isn’t about to collaborate with neighborhood groups on a national preventive health outreach initiative.

Broader and deeper social changes often threaten the interests of the most powerful financial and political groups. There is an unequal distribution of power, money, and prestige in most societies, and differential power relationships enable some people to act at the expense of others, often based on race, class, gender, national origin, religion, age, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability. Inequality and the abuse of power are facts of life at the local, national, and global levels; and most often the problems experienced locally by a society’s least powerful groups can be linked to relations of power at the higher levels. These problems don’t just trickle down from above; they rain down in a torrent of injustice and oppression. A variety of ideologies and theories may “explain” public issues as private troubles, often by “blaming the victim” (W. Ryan, 1971). And these ideas are reinforced by politicians, the news media, the business community, and academia.

When push comes to shove, dominant groups tend to assert their will without much concern for the competing concerns of community members. In their roles as institutional decision-makers, business leaders, elected officials, administrators, bureaucrats, and professionals all can be expected to act out of perceptions of group and individual self-interests. Their behavior may turn on such factors as a wish to maximize profits, increase votes, maintain competitive advantages, please the powerful, or advance careers or some notion of the “public interest.” Whatever the reasons, unless the potential change can be framed in “win-win” terms that retain
their positions of control and privilege, power holders can be expected to resist such initiatives.

Under such circumstances, collaborative, developmental approaches usually will be ineffective. Fisher and Shragge (2000) have critiqued Community Development for its failure to “deal with underlying issues that are caused by polarized interest, such as banks that redline the community, corporations that abandon it, absentee landlords who run it down, or private/public policy that undermines it at almost every turn” (pp. 8–9). They challenge the assumptions that local communities have sufficient resources to resolve all problems on their own, that the private sector will be “an eager partner” in efforts for social change, and that government should be let off the hook as responsibility is shifted to “empowered citizens.” I agree. There should be no quick assumption about the existence of common interests between community members and powerful groups in either the private or public sectors, and if a competitive dynamic does exist, social action will be required to force concessions.

GCOs may undertake Social Action at three different structural levels according to Miller’s “Three Ts of Power” (1971). The taming of power only is concerned with the elimination of the worst abuses, such as police brutality, racial profiling, predatory lending, or unfair evictions. Power relations are altered only to the extent that institutional decision-makers are forced to wield power in a less offensive manner. When groups work to transfer power, they seek to replace some decision-makers with “their own people.” Examples might include a GCO from a predominantly Latino neighborhood helping to elect the first Mexican Americans to their local city council, an affordable housing group pushing to get a tenant activist named to a rent review board, or a disability rights organization making sure that the commissioner for the deaf and hard of hearing is herself a deaf person. While the new people presumably will be more sympathetic, the positions that they hold remain the same. However, the transformation of power entails the restructuring of relationships such as the passage of a mental patients’ rights bill, creation of a housing trust fund, establishment of a Living Wage, approval of driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants, or institutionalization of universal health care. Such changes redistribute power so that community members receive concrete benefits and gain a greater measure of control over some aspect of their life circumstances.

Recognizing the limitations of Community Development as well as the necessity for Social Action if fundamental, redistributive change is being sought, this book will focus on essential tools and skills for both approaches. Community Development can strengthen social relationships, build civic infrastructure, foster feelings of pride, and create a sense of ownership. Such attributes are of great value, especially in communities that have been undervalued and oppressed. While a collaborative
approach is inappropriate when interests collide, it takes more than competition to build a community. Cooperation and a degree of consensus are essential components of any healthy community. Community Development offers different possibilities for community building than does Social Action, and this approach is an important option for GCOs in many situations.

**ORGANIZING FOR POWER**

**Ten Tools for Taking Power**

Many, if not most, organizing efforts will be met with resistance, and community members will need to exercise their collective power to persuade, pressure, or push decision-makers to meet their demands. What are the most common sources of power for a GCO? How can community members wield the power of their numbers to achieve their goals and objectives? Below are ten routes for achieving grassroots power:

1. *Doing It Yourself:* As discussed above, community members exercise their collective power to accomplish shared goals when they act directly to solve their own problems by taking a Community Development approach. Typical examples include cleanups, volunteer telephone “hotlines,” community gardens, crime watches, special fundraisers to save programs that lose public dollars, small-scale construction projects, and member-run educational programs. But “doing it yourself” also can be used within Social Action to call attention to failures to act by responsible public or private officials. For instance, if the traffic department didn’t respond to a GCO’s demands to install a stoplight at a dangerous intersection, organizational members might take direct action to stop and direct traffic during the rush hour, creating commuter chaos and consternation among city officials. Or a manufacturing company that pollutes an adjacent river might be targeted as part of a volunteer environmental cleanup day.

2. *Developing Persuasive Arguments:* Here the power calculus includes two variables—the sway of information and the strength of numbers. Remember the Old Elephant Joke? Question: “Where does an elephant sleep?” Answer: “Anywhere it wants!” The strength of numbers is like an elephant. The more people actively engaged and committed to a particular position, the more credibility given to information supporting that position. So a new report documenting the need for affordable housing released at a rally with 1,000 people in attendance will have more impact than if presented at a small, poorly attended press conference.
That said, new information or a fresh interpretation of existing data certainly can carry a weight of its own. For instance, ACORN released “The Great Divide of 2003,” a study documenting racial and economic disparities in the mortgage lending market. The data showed that African American homebuyers were more than twice as likely to be denied a conventional purchase loan as whites, while Latinos were rejected one and one half times more often. The study also included recommendations for steps to address this problem (ACORN News, October 16, 2003, pp. 1–2). Institutional decision-makers also may be persuaded to support a GCO’s position, if the argument is made in a manner that reframes the issue into “win-win” terms that meet mutual interests. For instance, the business community might actively promote progressive legislation for immigrant rights once they better understand the role of newcomers in filling labor shortages in the existing economy. A variety of mechanisms can be used for demonstrating numerical support for a particular position, including letters, e-mails, petitions, testimony, and large attendance at public hearings.

3. **Raising Awareness and Consciousness:** A GCO can engage in a variety of activities to draw attention to and politicize a social situation. During the fall of 2003, Immigrant Workers Freedom Rides involved hundreds of people traveling across the United States in buses to raise public awareness about the need for immigrant rights. Stopping at historic sites where earlier civil rights, labor, and community struggles had taken place, the riders were able to make the connection to other progressive movements for economic and social justice. The Freedom Rides generated new allies from organized labor, religious organizations, universities, community groups, and the general public.

   Forums, teach-ins, vigils, rallies, and marches all dramatically can increase public awareness. Popular education also is a prime tool for raising political consciousness. United for a Fair Economy holds participatory workshops designed to make attendees aware of the increased concentration of wealth both in the United States and across the world. Workshop participants take an active role in these sessions, learning through dialogue with one another, as well as from the trainer. Group exercises are lively and engaging, drawing from everyone’s knowledge and direct experience. The theory of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1970, 1973) is particularly relevant for popular education, and will be explored in greater depth in a later discussion about Leadership Development.

4. **Using Existing Laws, Policies, and Processes:** Often, GCOs can gain leverage simply by taking advantage of readily available tools for holding public and private institutional decision-makers more accountable. For example, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) could be utilized to force the city tax collector to open the books for public (and GCO)
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scrutiny. The list of leading tax delinquents might include high-profile businesses that had been aggressively pushing an antispending line vis-à-vis a new city-run youth center or an elderly lunch program. The contradictory “fiscal responsibility” position of these businesses quickly would lose credibility, especially in the face of well-publicized direct actions by the GCO. And the tax collector’s failure to recover the missing taxes would make it more difficult for the city to argue that funding for the new projects wasn’t possible. Likewise, an existing, but forgotten, inclusionary zoning policy could be utilized to force developers to make 20 percent of all new units affordable to low- and moderate-income people. And a GCO might make use of a current regulatory process to force large public hearings that would turn up the heat on a public service commission that originally intended to quietly approve a large rate increase for the gas company.

5. *Creating or Changing Laws, Policies, and Processes*: If the appropriate tools aren’t already in place, collective action can be taken to improve those that exist, create new ones, or contest pending ones that are undesirable. During the summer of 2003, ACORN organized a Living Wage coalition in San Francisco with support from nearly a dozen labor and community organizations. They gained backing from the four primary mayoral campaigns; drafted a strong ordinance with the assistance of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University; helped generate a study by the Institute for Labor and Employment at University of California, Berkeley; and gathered more than 20,000 voter signatures in just two weeks to place an initiative on the ballot. San Francisco voters approved an $8.50 citywide minimum wage by a 60 to 40 percent margin in the November election, expanding upon a Living Wage measure enacted in 2000 (*ACORN News*, November 12, 2003, p. 2). Similarly, an organized group of child care workers might push a state Office for Children to establish a health insurance program for family-based providers. Or consumers of mental health services might succeed in pressuring the Department of Mental Health to create new guidelines regulating the conditions under which hospitalized patients are placed in restraints. Opposition also could be mounted to fight a wide range of proposed laws, policies, or regulatory processes.

6. *Generating Publicity*: A GCO’s power is not simply a direct function of the size of its membership. Third-party audiences—often the general public—may play a decisive role in determining whether organizational goals are achieved. Positive or negative publicity may impact the ability of individual decision-makers from either the public or private sectors to maintain or gain positions of power and to advance their careers. Obviously, elected officials depend on votes and are very sensitive to any type of public exposure. Private businesses connect their public image with their ability to
make profits and draw customers; and nonprofits such as universities, hospitals, research centers, museums, and human services agencies are interested in attracting students, patients, staff, members, clients, and financial contributors. Public bureaucracies (e.g., a housing authority, parks department, state transit authority, or department of environmental affairs) generally are under the leadership of appointed officials who are not directly elected. However, the glare of public attention can either win or lose the support of the elected officials who do the appointing.

Positive publicity often comes through public forums such as meetings, hearings, legislative sessions, and press events where decision-makers engaged by GCOs are presented with chances to “do the right thing” and meet the organization’s requests or demands. Judy Meredith (see Chapter 7) calls these situations “hero opportunities.” Negative exposure and embarrassment may occur when GCOs protest the actions of decision-makers and institutions through tactics such as rallies, marches, tours, vigils, “awards,” picketing, pledges, and other actions that generate “moral superiority” by highlighting the target’s blame and shame. An organization’s ability to bless or blast its targets is an important source of power.

7. **Exercising Electoral Power:** Clearly, when a GCO influences elected officials to act in a particular manner as discussed above, it exercises a form of electoral power. But there are other tools for utilizing the power of the vote. At the lowest level, GCOs may be involved in voter registration. Typically, this activity is targeted so as to enfranchise current or potential members of the organizational constituency. The Chelsea Collaborative in conjunction with the Latino Immigrant Committee registered 1,400 new Latino voters prior to the primary election in September 2003, thereby increasing their percentage among all voters in the city from 10 to 25 percent. Between July and the end of November 2003, ACORN registered 73,684 voters in low- and moderate-income African American and Latino neighborhoods across the United States.

Voter education consists of publicizing candidates’ positions on particular issues, policies, or pieces of legislation. Written materials, websites, e-mails, and print and electronic media all may be utilized to get the word out. However, GCOs frequently hold “candidates nights” or forums where candidates are asked pointed questions about where they stand on various matters. These processes inform the electorate about candidates’ positions, undoubtedly influencing many voters, regardless of whether the GCO actually endorses anyone.

Such actions usually are accompanied by a Get Out The Vote (GOTV) effort, whereby the GCO uses its people power to make sure that organizational supporters actually get to the polls to vote. Under certain
circumstances, a GCO actually may make formal endorsements of favored candidates (see Pillsbury, Chapter 7). Finally, electoral power also can be exercised through either support or opposition for voter initiatives—proposed laws, policies, or regulatory processes that have been placed on the ballot by petitions signed by registered voters. At the national level, America Votes, whose founding members include ACORN, AFL-CIO, AFSCME, the League of Conservation Voters, MoveOn.org, NAACP, the National Voter Fund, Partnership for America’s Families, People for the American Way, SEIU, and the Sierra Club, was formed to register, educate, and mobilize voters for the 2004 elections.

8. Affecting Appointments: GCOs also can exercise power by influencing who is named or removed from appointed positions, either in administrative positions or on policy-making and oversight boards. Thus, organized public housing residents might utilize a variety of tactics to force the removal of the director of a housing authority who they believe is incompetent, corrupt, or abusing power. Likewise, they also might push for a formal role in the hiring of a new director or could lobby on behalf of a particular candidate for the position. Appointed boards might be responsible for such functions as city zoning, regulating public utilities, overseeing the public health department, monitoring banking practices, or receiving consumer complaints.

In Baltimore, ACORN members took action to reshape the composition of the library board and its process of self-selection that had resulted in most trustees living in wealthy neighborhoods far removed from the inner city where library branches were slated for closing. In Miami, the organization was successful in pushing for the establishment of a Civilian Review Board with both subpoena power and an ACORN representative to investigate allegations of police brutality.

9. Exercising Consumer Power: Members of GCOs typically have limited financial resources. By definition, low- and moderate-income people have little economic leverage as individuals. However, when organizational members act collectively, they frequently can exercise consumer power—both positive and negative. At the most basic level, GCOs may be able to secure member discounts at a wide array of retail stores. Such benefits may help defray the costs of annual membership dues and certainly provide a positive incentive for people to join the organization. “Greenlining” may be possible when members pool their modest savings, using the leverage generated by the aggregate amount to obtain more favorable lending policies from local banks. When businesses act against the interests of community members, customer boycotts are a tried and true tactic.

For instance, a neighborhood supermarket with no nearby competition might have poor-quality meat and produce, be badly operated,
and still charge very high prices. After negotiations with the store’s management failed to produce significant changes, a GCO could organize a boycott. A picket line would be set up in front of the market with organizational leaders passing out leaflets urging prospective shoppers to take their business elsewhere until the GCO’s demands were met. Allies might provide vans and minibuses that could be used to transport neighborhood residents to markets outside of the area, dramatically decreasing business until the offending store felt compelled to return to the bargaining table in good faith. At the state, regional, national, or global levels, an organization needs to move beyond its own membership to activate allies, individual supporters, and the general public to honor the boycott.

10. Disrupting “Business As Usual”: The final tool for taking power discussed herein entails nonviolent interference with the target system’s ability to operate in a normal fashion. There’s an element of force involved at this point, but nothing that’s physically harmful to life, limb, or material goods. This book won’t examine tools that would move beyond this degree of disorder to the destruction of property or interpersonal violence. At the lowest level, a flood of letters, e-mails, or phone calls might disrupt the customary routine of elected officials, bureaucrats, or business managers. A picket line that third parties are reluctant to cross obviously creates a disturbance, as does a noisy demonstration with media coverage. Passive resistance may be utilized to sit in, lie down in front of heavy equipment, chain oneself to a desk, “squat” in an abandoned building, stop traffic, or block the doors of a building. And GCO members may take direct action to physically and operationally take over a meeting.

For example, members of the Chelsea Green Space Committee became frustrated when the state Department of Environmental Management (DEM) refused to enforce its own “cease and desist order” requiring a neighborhood polluter to stop operating until they obeyed the law. After several futile attempts to generate a positive response from the state bureaucracy, two busloads of angry Chelsea residents stormed into a DEM press event, took over the microphone, and proceeded to tell their story to the assembled media. Another disruptive tactic, first developed by Saul Alinsky (1971), entails having a wealthy ally buy several hundred shares of stock in a private company that’s being targeted. The shares then can be transferred to GCO members—one apiece—granting them entrance into an annual shareholders’ meeting. Once inside, the new shareholders can use the corporation’s own rules to perform any number of legal but disruptive acts to bring the organization’s position to the attention of other stockholders, followed by a press conference outside the meeting to help ensure that the message gets out to the general public.
Building a Power Base

Developing power is a function of an organization’s ability to succeed while simultaneously building its strength for future efforts. These twin goals of winning concrete changes and building collective capacity can be met best when the members experience their combined power and fully own the organization. Strategies and tactics should maximize the involvement of and direction by both the members and leaders at every stage. Success never should be achieved at the expense of constituency control. Victories only translate into longer term organizational power when real ownership is exercised.

Full participation and broad-based control are possible only when democratic structures open up opportunities for access within an organization. People may not particularly value democracy as an abstract ideal. Their intent may be to meet basic social needs and interests as quickly and efficiently as possible. Involvement, expression, and ownership may be prized only to the degree that they contribute to achieving social change. But, in fact, that’s precisely the point. Large numbers of people taking collective action is the fundamental source of power for the victims of social injustice. And democratic structures and processes are necessary to develop the commitment and control necessary to attract full participation. As more people get involved, the organization grows in size and power.

Warren Haggstrom’s (1971) concept of “organizational mileage” can be used to measure whether such a building process is taking place. A number of criteria can be examined to determine whether organizational growth has occurred, including (but not limited to) number of participants involved, leadership development, allies cultivated, public recognition for the group, enhanced credibility, resources attracted, strategic/tactical knowledge gained, victories achieved, and progress toward long-range goals. There is more to establishing organizational mileage than simply winning victories. It is just as important how an organization takes action and grows in strength as whether it wins.

A simple social action example should help clarify this point. Imagine a community organization whose members want an abandoned house in the neighborhood boarded up to help prevent vandalism and arson until it can be rehabbed for affordable housing. The landlord, Jack B. Nimble, moved far away two years before and hasn’t been heard from since. A letter to the Building Commissioner, Will Delay (responsible for securing dangerous buildings), has produced no response. At a leadership planning meeting, the following suggestions are made:

- Myles Sender proposes that a petition be circulated and then forwarded to Jack B. Nimble, whose address has been discovered through extensive research.
Max Response argues that the group should contact the local state representative, Bess Clout, who has considerable influence at city hall.

Ben Chummy, a new member, reveals that he’s an old friend of Will Delay and offers to make a personal phone call to him—a tactic that worked well for Ben in his old neighborhood.

Faith Media disagrees and argues that the group should contact a local television news reporter, Lance Boyle, who’s done numerous hard-hitting exposés on city government waste, corruption, and inefficiency.

What is the best way to win a victory and build the group?

The first suggestion seems to offer little chance for success. Jack B. Nimble has moved far away and hasn’t been in the neighborhood for two years. Myles’s suggestion does little to put pressure on the landlord. A petition is just a list of names on a piece of paper. It doesn’t have any real ability directly or indirectly to threaten the interests of such a distant target. Not only is this tactic ineffectual, but the choice of target probably is wrong. The group appears to have minimal leverage on the owner; Will Delay seems to be a much better target.

The idea of activating Bess Clout to lean on the Commissioner might offer some real possibility for success. She clearly has influence at city hall and also should be responsive to the wishes of her constituents. Yet politicians who play key roles in achieving a change usually attempt to grab as much credit as possible. In this case, the message would be that Bess Clout had to intervene on behalf of neighborhood residents to solve the problem.

Still, who cares how the issue is resolved, as long as a victory is won? The answer lies in the group’s goals. More fundamental issues are at stake than simply dealing with an abandoned house. The underlying question is, “What is the role that residents should play in decisions and policies that impact their own neighborhood?” Developing a strong organization alters basic power relationships and gives community members an ongoing voice in the circumstances that affect their lives. When a politician acts in place of the members themselves, the GCO may be severely weakened. People might come to believe that they don’t have the power to make change directly and may lapse into depending on powerful people such as Bess to act as intermediaries to solve their problems. This is inconsistent with the goal of direct organizational power and control over neighborhood affairs.

And certainly as the issues get larger and the financial stakes increase, powerful people are more likely to be the targets of group action than the saviors of neighborhood residents. Group pressure could be brought to bear on Bess Clout to support the GCO’s demands. This at least would give people some sense of their collective power and would activate Ms. Clout’s substantial leverage at city hall. But it’s far better if the members can move
directly on the Commissioner. Is there a better way of developing the organization while getting the house boarded up?

Ben Chummy’s suggestion of going to Will Delay directly might produce quick results, but his approach also reinforces the notion that it’s “who you know” that really counts in winning a change. Ben’s method rests entirely on the strength of an individual personal relationship. Such a friendship may be sufficient to produce action on this particular problem, but it can’t be relied on for other issues. A phone call from a friend won’t prevent a highway from being built through a neighborhood, an airport from being expanded, or city services from being cut. Those situations require the kind of power only generated by organized numbers. It is very important to win smaller victories using strategies and tactics consistent with those needed for larger struggles. Such a process develops direct action experience and skill among the leadership, educates them about the nature of institutional power relationships, strengthens the organizational power base, and increases members’ confidence in the efficacy of their own collective action.

But what about Faith’s idea about the investigative reporter? Certainly, a sympathetic media helps win over third-party support and puts pressure on a target. Here the news coverage would appear to be a sound strategy, but not in the form of the exposé by Lance Boyle. Rather, organizational action should be the prime story, with media coverage playing a supportive but subordinate role. Otherwise, the primary lesson is that publicity alone is the most significant source of power, with individual friends in the press acting on behalf of the powerless.

The greatest organizational mileage occurs when the maximum number of members are directly involved in winning a victory. Participatory direct actions emphasizing people power do this best. The basic lesson is, “We won because we’re organized. There’s strength in numbers.” Such strategies build a sense of ownership and control, empowering people through the process of organizing, as well as through the specific reforms or benefits achieved.

For instance, the abandoned house issue could be handled by demanding that Will Delay come to an evening meeting in the neighborhood. The press could be invited, a tour of the vacant property conducted, angry testimony about the dangers given, and firm specific demands made to the commissioner. If he failed to show for the meeting or refused the demands, the action easily could be escalated and moved to his office or house. A public official such as the Commissioner probably would be appointed by the mayor. If the Commissioner resisted, the mayor could be targeted instead. Presumably, such an elected official would be more vulnerable to organized pressure than an appointed one.

Whatever the specific strategy and tactics employed, this approach involves large numbers of people taking action. There are significant roles
for leaders and members. The goal of getting the house boarded up should be pursued in a way that builds the organizational power base. Mileage, or organizational development, should not be sacrificed for a victory. There’s a bottom-up rather than a top-down strategy, so that people experience their own power in the process of winning. Concessions should be won through collective struggle, not handed over by benign elites or achieved through the intervention of powerful “friends.” Shortcuts may save time and produce success on small issues, but they won’t be effective when the fights are more ambitious and the resistance is much greater. Then, a powerful organization will be needed. Organizational mileage helps measure whether such a group is being developed.

Sometimes a GCO grows in strength even when a victory is not won. Seattle ACORN worked closely with Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 8, SEIU Local 6, and “YES for Seattle” in attempting to pass Charter Amendment 5, which proposed to convert city council elections from an at-large system to districts, thereby increasing councilor accountability and accessibility. The amendment was closely defeated (53 to 47 percent) on November 4, 2003. However, the unsuccessful campaign strengthened this ACORN chapter in many different ways. New members were recruited, organizational leaders developed skills in electoral campaigning, deepened relationships with important allies were established, ACORN’s credibility was enhanced, and the effort “invigorated a movement around government accountability in Seattle, [engaging] diverse communities and leaders in an ongoing discussion about the future of city politics.” (ACORN News, November 12, 2003, p. 5).
GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Collective Action by community members draws on the strength of numbers, participatory processes, and indigenous leadership to decrease power disparities and achieve shared goals for social change.

Four Arenas of Organizing
- Turf
- Issue
- Identity
- Workplace

Two Organizing Approaches
- Community Development
- Social Action

Community Development involves participants in constructive activities and processes to produce improvements, opportunities, structures, goods, and services that increase the quality of life, build individual and collective capacities, and enhance social solidarity.

Goals of Community Development
- Problem Resolution
- Capacity Building
- Social Solidarity

Social Action brings people together to convince, pressure, or coerce external decision-makers to meet collective goals either to act in a specified manner or to modify or stop certain activities.

Goals of Social Action
- Problem Resolution
- Building a Power Base
- Decreasing Power Disparities
TEN TOOLS FOR TAKING POWER

Doing It Yourself
Developing Persuasive Arguments
Raising Awareness and Consciousness
Using Existing Laws, Policies, and Processes
Creating or Changing Laws, Policies, and Processes
Generating Publicity
Exercising Electoral Power
Affecting Appointments
Exercising Consumer Power
Disrupting “Business as Usual”
Groups do not form and take action by spontaneous combustion. Someone has to pull people together to begin the process of taking collective action. Whoever does this is functioning as an organizer. Many different people with a mix of skills may act as organizer at various points in a GCO’s life. The role includes being a recruiter, motivator, agitator, leader, consolidator, facilitator, trainer, strategist, and tactician. Often, small groups with limited funds and goals, especially SIMs, do not have paid or formally designated organizers. However, the work that’s inherent in this role doesn’t disappear. Under such circumstances, leaders perform these functions as needed or else group development suffers accordingly.

When organizers are hired by a GCO, they can come from within or outside the group’s own membership. In either case, they may or may not have formal training and experience as professional organizers. That said, there is a body of knowledge and a set of skills for organizers, just as there is for nurses, mechanics, computer programmers, lawyers, or electricians. Organizers need to know how to create and develop structures through which community members can take collective action to achieve their goals. The role of organizer, as well as the knowledge base and skill set attendant to it, is separate and distinct from the important qualities necessary for effective leadership.

While at times organizing entails taking leadership to move a group forward, and while leaders sometimes act as organizers, in most situations these two roles are very different. By definition, a leader directs and guides a group by being out in front of followers. No matter how democratic the process, leaders go before their backers, showing the way for action. They lead by pulling their constituency along through example and inspiration.
While good leaders may be totally committed to building rank-and-file participation and ownership, their primary role is to help the group achieve its goals by being at the head of the pack.

It’s the organizer’s job to get other people to take the lead, continuously locating “new blood” to invigorate and democratize the organization. Potential activists need to be identified, relationships established, and recruitment undertaken. These new members should be integrated into organizational committees and given the opportunity to take on responsibilities and tasks. Someone needs to cultivate emerging leaders, providing encouragement, support, and training as needed. Organizers help facilitate the development of shared goals for change along with strategies and action plans to accomplish them. They work with the leadership to implement those plans and to evaluate the results. They help expand the members’ knowledge and skills, bolster their self-confidence, and deepen their commitment to collective action. As organizer Moshe ben Asher often says, “Coaching is the essence of the organizer role” (1984).

If leader and organizer functions are combined, an interesting paradox emerges. When a community leader acts in a manner consistent with the role of organizer (e.g., getting others involved; or acting as recruiter, teacher, enabler, or facilitator), this usually is viewed as an organizational strength. On the other hand, to the extent that an organizer takes on the role of a leader (chairing meetings, acting as group representative or spokesperson), there may be concern that other leadership isn’t being developed sufficiently. Clearly, the common denominator in both instances is an emphasis on the need to build a broad base of participation, community ownership, and leadership, rather than relying on the skill, initiative, and direction of one indispensable person.

Nevertheless, it is certainly possible for an individual to take on both roles, as Cesar Chavez did with the United Farm Workers. Such “leader-organizers” clearly must be community members themselves in order to be indigenous leaders of their GCO. And, depending on particular circumstances at different points in time, one role may be in the foreground while the other remains in the background. Striking some balance between these two distinct functions will be essential. Otherwise, the group itself will suffer either from inadequate leadership or due to a lack of organizational development—unless other members pick up the slack.

What else does the role of organizer entail? They also must have some vision of social change along with knowledge about how to achieve it. They must be able to help translate people’s dreams for a better life into reality. Organizers facilitate the process through which community members begin to analyze the circumstances of their lives and then think about making changes in institutions and power relationships. These changes may be in the treatment people receive from the local police, a social worker, a public housing manager, a city hall bureaucrat, or a U.S. senator. Or they may include new ideas...
that GCO members have for running the schools, delivering social services, dealing with corporate polluters, or rebuilding their neighborhood. In still other cases, organizations may set goals for national health insurance, restructuring public welfare, federal banking reform, or full employment.

Some visions will be immediate and local, others long-range and sweeping. All must be defined by the members themselves. Organizers help people develop collective visions and goals, as well as an effective organizational structure through which action can be taken. Consistent with the principles of Paulo Freire (1973), organizers should be “teacher-learners” as they impart knowledge and also relate to GCO members as “learner-teachers.” They work with people to define issues along with strategies and tactics to win victory. At times, organizers will model behavior, as when they take the lead to set up and maintain open, democratic structures and group processes. It’s part of the job to act as organizational gadfly, challenging complacency and keeping things action oriented.

Organizing may engender images of enormous meetings, huge actions, gigantic rallies, and massive marches. But the bulk of an organizer’s time is spent working either with individuals—in their kitchens, on their front door stoops, and over the phone—or with small groups in an endless array of meetings for recruitment, action research, community education, leadership training, executive decisions, grassroots fundraising, strategic analysis, action planning, negotiating, lobbying, and evaluating organizational actions and activities. The ability to establish excellent interpersonal relationships with GCO leaders and members is the single most important variable determining an organizer’s success. Strong interpersonal skills are a must. An organizer cannot be phony in any sense. Anyone taking on this role genuinely must like and respect the people with whom he or she works and be able to connect and communicate in a way that establishes trust, creates confidence, and inspires the active involvement of community members necessary to build a real power base. There is no way to fake these qualities. Within a short time, community members will see through any artificial front, as many ideologues have learned through painful experience.

The best organizers will be sincere, respectful, aligned with the interests of community members, and highly committed to their collective empowerment. They must develop close relationships of mutual trust with a number of organizational leaders and members. However, basic fairness and impartiality also will be essential; favoritism should be carefully avoided. Community organizers have to be excellent active listeners who know how to draw people into dialogue and discussion about their hopes, fears, and self-interests. They need the enthusiasm, conviction, and persuasive skills to motivate potential activists to become involved in organizational activities. The work is never completely finished, and the hours often are open-ended. Organizers must possess the energy, drive, stamina, and perseverance necessary to do a job that often causes burnout.
Often it’s easier to do things for people, saving time and getting personal ego satisfaction in the process. Yet such shortcuts only reduce organizational growth by robbing the members of ownership and control. Organizers must be able to do their work without creating relationships of dependence and overreliance. Decision-making power must remain with the full membership. Sometimes this job will be formal, other times informal, but it always should be recognized and clearly defined. When full-time, paid organizers are hired, mutual expectations and responsibilities should be clearly specified to clarify the duties and limits of the position. The organizer must be accountable to the group; her or his role should be discussed and approved by all parties concerned. ACORN features a “contract” between the staff and the organization, with written job descriptions and evaluation procedures that help clear up much potential confusion.

Contrary to popular myth, the role of organizer does not disappear as a group matures and grows, although it does change. Certainly, knowledge and skills required for choosing issues, doing action research, formulating strategies and tactics, conducting effective meetings, engaging in direct actions, raising funds, and maintaining group structure can and should be transferred from organizers to leaders. The issue usually is not one of competence or technical skill. However, time may be a significant factor. Virtually all leaders of GCOs are volunteers, who often have jobs, families, and personal responsibilities that make it difficult to devote the amount of time necessary to keep their organizations thriving and developing. Paid staff are able to work the kinds of hours that even a combination of volunteers usually cannot match, and they are able to do a fair share of the day-to-day detail work inevitable in every group.

More important, some functions are much more consistent with the role of organizer than that of leader. There is a very real need for someone continually to enlarge the organizational base and help maintain the direct-action focus of the group. New issues must be surfaced, additional members recruited, and fresh leadership developed. Democratic, participatory structures and processes must be improved and preserved. While “new blood” usually is healthy for a GCO, existing leaders may at times want to hang onto their organizational positions of authority and status. Organizers have no such conflicts of interest about broadening the GCO’s base. While particular organizers may work themselves out of specific jobs, there is an important, ongoing developmental role for organizers to play. Any job description should emphasize and build in primary responsibility for expanding, energizing, and democratizing the organization. If good money is spent to hire staff, it should be used to promote maximum organizational growth.

Often, members and leaders will have little or no experience with organizers prior to their involvement in a GCO. Unlike the dentist, plumber, or school teacher, the role of the organizer with established standards and
expectations isn’t common in our society. Because of this, people may have trouble distinguishing between actions and qualities that are typical of the role and those that are unique to the particular individual holding the organizer job. Thus, all organizers don’t eat or dress in a particular manner as an inherent part of their job. But all do ask lots of questions, spend long hours doing recruitment, and constantly push new people to take on more responsibility. While personal relationships are inevitable and positive, it also will be essential for organizers to establish role relationships with the GCOs with which they work. Then, if the group changes organizers, the new person can move into the position with minimal difficulty.

Organizers need to be willing and able to make some level of personal compromise on lifestyle and value positions that conflict with constituency norms—or else work with a different group. If you alienate people, you will never be able to be an effective organizer. Nevertheless, most will not come to the role as a blank page. Usually, organizers will have an analysis and vision of collective power as a long-range goal. To this end, they may value a number of elements that enhance organizational development, such as leadership training, numbers, direct action, participation, democracy, open decision-making structures, information sharing, allies, resources, public image, good group processes, strategic/tactical preparation, and victories. They should have a reasonably clear idea of how to improve in these areas. After all, that is the task at hand.

Thus, an organizer must be “inner directed” with a clear sense of mission and yet completely tuned in to the feelings and beliefs of the constituency. This requires confidence, patience, sensitivity, a sense of humor, and tremendous interactive skills. At times, ideas and issues that the organizer raises may create anxiety, fear, or hostility. When this happens, organizers must be able to placate the timid, cultivate the emergent, and stimulate the angry in a way that will animate the entire organization. In other instances, organizers will have to operate so as to motivate, facilitate, agitate, or educate. Clearly, all this necessitates an exceptional ability to relate and communicate.

Much of the work can be done through the skillful use of Socratic questioning, which helps focus discussion. As leaders and members respond, they make their own decisions and hopefully become more invested than when someone simply gives them an answer. Such a process can further the development of ownership and control, as long as the organizer doesn’t misuse this technique by “fishing” for the “right” answers. However, this indirect approach also can generate charges of organizer manipulation. While organizers may not speak for the group directly, the degree of their influence and power may become an issue.

In fact, influence is inevitable whenever humans interact. This principle applies to organizers, leaders, members, allies, and opponents. Indeed, there can be no denying that organizers do and should influence people
as part of their jobs. Plumbers know how to fix pipes, doctors can heal bodies, engineers are able to design bridges—and organizers should have the knowledge and skill to develop GCOs that maximize the power of community members. In each case, the “client” can make the final decision about which options to choose, which suggestions to follow. It is expected that the relevant “expert” have some advice to offer that can be used or refused. Certainly, it is good to be suspicious of trained specialists; frequently they are wrong. Nevertheless, people have a right to expect them to know something. The fact that rich folks have stockbrokers, lawyers, accountants, doctors, gardeners, and therapists who give them options and make suggestions does not mean that the wealthy are disempowered—because they retain control and make the final decision.

Members of GCOs and those who serve as their organizers are no different. Any attempt to hold organizers to some other standard is at best unrealistic and at worst dishonest. It is the organizer’s responsibility to share information, pose questions, identify options, suggest alternatives, or name problems that impact on the collective power the group can wield. To do anything less is to cop out and not do the job. It’s easy to be pure—just do absolutely nothing.

But it’s also not difficult for organizers to go over the line and abuse the very real influence that they wield. Paid staff usually spend more time on GCO affairs than volunteer leaders, and this almost guarantees that they will hold more information than anyone else. And, clearly, this information gives such staff a degree of power. Add the fact that organizers very often are motivated to do their jobs by strong feelings of anger about injustice and potent visions of fundamental social change, and it becomes clear that they frequently will have strong views about what should be done. It is naïve and impractical to assume that paid staff should not or will not hope to weigh in on a host of questions and issues. The key is not to let them impose their ideas on the membership. The expert opinions of staff should be welcomed, but the membership should not defer to them. Ultimately, the final decision-making power should rest with the organization’s membership.

The organizer doesn’t have to be an expert on specific issues and options. Often, this will come from the members themselves. In other situations, action research or policy specialists from the relevant fields will provide this information. Organizers’ expertise lies in their ability to help people build powerful structures through which they can act collectively to pursue their own goals. The power base is a means to that specific end, as well as to the resolution of future issues. Obviously, if the strategy is weak, neither the immediate nor the long-term interests of the constituency will be met. The organizer should be able to provide real assistance in how to win, but what to pursue is up to the members with input from the organizer as is appropriate.
Still, there may be times when the majority makes and acts on decisions that are both prejudicial and work against long-term empowerment. A few examples of this “tyranny of the majority” are listed below. Imagine tenants’ organizations in various public housing developments:

- A majority of the tenants in an all-white development could vote democratically to actively and aggressively oppose any and all attempts to integrate the development.
- A majority of tenants in a 35 percent Spanish-speaking development could vote to hold all public meetings only in English with no translations.
- A majority of tenants in a development could vote to exclude girls from the local basketball team.
- A majority of tenants could vote to refuse gays or lesbians the right to take a leadership role on any organizational committee dealing with issues that relate to youth.
- A majority of tenants could vote to hold only one general membership meeting per year and to entrust the elected leadership to make all intervening decisions.
- A majority of tenants could vote to suspend elections for the next five years, locking in the current weak, co-opted leadership.

In each of the above examples, “the people” would decide, and “self-determination” would be exercised. Yet, in some instances, the democratic vote would be a clear act of discrimination. In other cases, the organization would be weakened, thereby decreasing the long-term power of tenants. It’s reasonable to assume that an organizer might intervene under these or similar circumstances. While the tenants would retain final control in these situations, the organizer also could exercise the right to leave the group if these practices violated her or his fundamental values. Organizers should draw the line on such issues.

The ACORN “contract” deals with this kind of conflict directly. There’s a clear understanding that the organizer’s job is to expand the base of the GCO. Any leadership action that prevents this through racial, ethnic, sexual, or other exclusion is a violation of the basic agreement. In such cases, the staff must clearly inform the ACORN board that a problem exists. Disputes on these issues are legitimate areas for staff involvement.

Other types of tactical choices potentially could weaken the organization. Under such circumstances, the organizer might raise questions, pose problems, suggest options, or in some other ways attempt to influence the group. For instance:
• A majority of tenants might be inclined to collect petitions when experience indicated that a face-to-face meeting with the relevant bureaucrat was necessary.

• A majority of tenants might want to hold a large, gala dinner dance before the organizer felt the group could pull off such an event successfully.

• A majority of tenants might wish to work on an “unwinnable” issue while overlooking a clear easy victory.

• A majority of tenants might prefer to endorse a mayoral candidate who clearly was unwilling to commit as much as her opponent.

• A majority of tenants might be ready to commit the organization to membership in a coalition effort that didn’t have its act together.

In these and other similar instances, it is appropriate for the organizer to actively intervene. Clearly, the job entails preserving the action orientation, openness, and democratic structure of the organization. The long-term interests of tenants require the building of an effective power base. When self-determination conflicts with this goal, the organizer should raise the issue directly or through a questioning process. But, when overruled, organizers have the responsibility to help carry out the wishes of the members to the best of their ability. Organizers must be prepared to “lose” at such times. When such action is morally and ethically unacceptable, they can resign.

Thus, organizers must stay within the experiences of community members, supporting the group’s decisions, except where their own basic values are violated. Yet they also have the responsibility to step back and analyze every situation from the perspective of organizational development and the strengthening of the group’s power base. In this sense, there will be times when they need to be somewhat marginal to the organization, moving both inside and outside members’ comfort zones by playing devil’s advocate, raising difficult questions, challenging preconceptions, posing hypothetical situations, stimulating critical thinking, helping develop creative options, and facilitating the process of envisioning a better future.

INSIDER/OUTSIDER UPSIDES AND DOWNSIDES*

How important is it for organizers to share the same characteristics as the community members with whom they work along dimensions such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, age, ableism, sex, or sexual orientation? What

*This section draws from a previous presentation at the International Federation of Social Work called “Insider/Outsider Upsides and Downsides” and published in Social Work with Groups (1998), 23(2), 19–35.
are the roles, barriers, and opportunities for organizers who are different, or “outsiders,” as compared to “insiders”?

Certainly, the particular arena in which organizing is taking place will be an important variable on these questions. For instance, GCOs that focus on identity typically place a high priority on securing staff who are in-group members with direct experience on the issues of concern. While organizers may come from a different geographic community (for example, a member of the same ethnic group who doesn’t reside in the neighborhood), this criteria may be met if he or she holds the same identity attribute as other group members. On the other hand, a lower percentage of turf-based organizations is likely to require membership in this “community of place” as a requisite for their staff. Of course, many will have such stipulations. But, on balance, such requirements will be less prevalent than with identity organizations. And issue and workplace organizations will tend to be the most open on this question.

However, communities are not monolithic. Whether the GCO addresses turf, identity, issue, or workplace matters, there may be significant heterogeneity with regard to qualities that are not the particular concentration of the organizing, including race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, age, sexual orientation, and physical or mental disability. Obviously, organizers can’t share the same characteristics with everyone in the group along each of these dimensions. So even insiders will be different from those with whom they work in many important ways, and perhaps outsiders will find some points of commonality.

My goal here is not to demonstrate which status is better or preferable. Rather, it’s important to understand the pluses and minuses of each along with guidelines so that organizers in either situation can maximize their assets while preparing for and minimizing their difficulties. These questions can be addressed by examining a number of factors, including roles and responsibilities, knowledge and perceptions, experience and interests, communication and cultural competence, relationships and linkages, as well as legitimacy and trust. The benefits and drawbacks of insider/outside status will vary, often inversely, with the pluses of one frequently reflecting the minuses of the other—and vice versa. Therefore, as each factor is explored, I will consider the pros and cons of each status—four different sets of circumstances.

**Roles and Responsibilities.** The insider enjoys the option of either holding the combined “leader-organizer” role or separating the functions. For instance, Deborah Anderson, a mental health consumer, served as an organizer but not a leader with M-POWER, a social action organization of mental health consumers in Massachusetts (Anderson, 1992). While she could have chosen to be a leader, Anderson decided to concentrate on developing a strong core of collective leadership for the group. In this situation, there was a clear division of responsibility between the organizer
(recruiter, facilitator, trainer) and the leaders (decision-makers, community representatives, spokespeople).

In other situations, the insider may choose to move in and out of a leadership role as needed. For example, picture a scenario where the leaders of a GCO are engaged in high-stakes negotiations with the mayor as to whether or not a new recreation center will be established in the neighborhood. Halfway into the negotiation session, the leaders begin to lose focus, getting sidetracked by the mayor (as a countertactic) in a divisive discussion about youth vandalism, drug use, and gang activity. The insider organizer who normally does not function as a leader can step in as a spokesperson to refocus the discussion on the group’s demands to set up a youth center.

In addition to playing such a backup role—essentially “leader of last resort”—the insider organizer also can serve as an effective role model. By demonstrating how not to be deflected from the issue at hand, the organizer increases the chances that community leaders will not be diverted so easily in future negotiations. However, this type of practice may prove to be a mixed blessing if abused. The organizer who steps into the breach too often to rescue the GCO may undermine the confidence of the leaders and create a relationship of dependency. There may be a tendency to expect or even want such an organizer to act as leader.

Decision-makers in external organizations with which the organization deals also may come to expect such behavior from the organizer and interact with the group accordingly, thereby reinforcing the organizer to act as leader. Such dynamics can create role confusion for both organizers and leaders. To the extent that one person plays both roles, there also will be a disturbing concentration of power that will make it more difficult to build a broad-based, democratic, collective leadership.

Still, the insider’s capacity to be a positive role model may be a source of inspiration for others. This is especially important in communities of identity and also relevant for low-income turf-based and workplace organizations. As a result, he or she may have a unique ability to recruit and mentor new community leaders. To the extent that the insider prioritizes the role of organizer with its focus on developing the leadership capacity of others, this chance to act as a leader on a limited basis should be a bonus. But it will be important to avoid the pitfall of overplaying this role.

The outsider’s role should be restricted to “organizer”; the leadership role is totally inappropriate for a nonmember of the community. While the outsider lacks the role flexibility of the insider, there is the advantage of role clarity with fewer temptations to stray from the organizer’s responsibilities. Because the outsider isn’t expected to function as leader, there are clear role expectations and responsibilities. It’s essential for the outsider to find and develop indigenous leadership who will move to the forefront of the group. The outsider organizer who does the job well will not be a spokesperson or a substitute for community leadership.
However, outsiders by definition will not be community role models. While they may model certain ways of thinking and behaving, they always will be different in a fundamental way. They also will be unable to step in as a leader in a crisis situation, such as the hypothetical one with the mayor described above. These certainly are not insurmountable problems, as long as the outsider recognizes and respects the limitation of acting as a spokesperson. At best, these circumstances will motivate outsiders to do what any good organizer should be doing—developing strong, independent leaders.

**Knowledge and Perceptions.** Obviously, insiders usually start with greater knowledge about the community’s history, politics, key institutions, and power relationships. They may have a much clearer sense of “who is who,” including gatekeepers, grassroots opinion leaders, grasstips leaders* (Haggstrom, 1971), and kinship and friendship patterns. The insider also will be more aware of the community’s informal helping networks and resources, an important consideration for an assets-based approach to change (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Such information and the accompanying insights will make it easier to do an accurate power analysis, an essential step in the groundwork stage of community organizing. Armed with this broader and deeper stock of knowledge about the community, the insider will be less likely to hold false perceptions and stereotypes about people, institutions, and problems. When talking with prospective members about possible organizing issues, she or he will have considerable ability to distinguish what is collectively shared from what is personal and idiosyncratic.

Outsiders, like all strangers, must begin by engaging in a process of “typification” (Schutz, 1967), understanding social phenomena by creating types or labels to interpret people and their actions. As outsiders become more familiar with the community, these initial simple types become inadequate to explain social reality and break down. New information requires them to reassess and retypify. Now it’s necessary to distinguish between social situations that are individual cases and those that are typical for community members. Through an ongoing process, the outsider gradually develops a more accurate picture of what’s going on and why. Indeed, there is a mutual typification process as outsider organizers interact with community members, who in turn try to learn who they are dealing with. All this takes time. Mistakes, misinterpretations, and some level of stereotyping are inevitable. The problems may be compounded in communities of identity. For instance, Tully (Tully, Craig, and Nugent, 1994) argues that

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*Haggstrom designated the term “grasstips leaders” for people who are accepted or chosen by the external power structure as spokespeople or brokers for their community. Grasstips leaders tend to occupy visible token positions in establishment groups, but have no real base of respect and support among grassroots community members.
“heterosexual community organizers who actively work only in those parts of the gay/lesbian community that are made visible to the outside world, may naively omit the largest portion of that community.”

Although the insider doesn’t have to contend with the steep learning curve of the outsider, she or he should be mindful of the subtle pitfalls that can arise when one is very familiar with a community group. While the outsider makes few assumptions and takes little for granted, the insider should take care not to assume too much. There is the danger that insider organizers will believe they “know it all” and hastily dismiss certain individuals, families, or issues based on prior knowledge.

My personal experience demonstrates that such prejudgments can be inaccurate and unfounded. For instance, I once worked with an organizer who was a resident of a public housing development where a recruitment drive was taking place utilizing doorknocking, personal contacts, and housemeetings. The organizer was quick to instruct the organizing team not to bother recruiting in several buildings because she “knew” that no one there would be interested. Since we were committed to systematically contacting all the residents, giving everyone the opportunity to participate in the group, we moved forward anyway. In fact, we wound up signing up a number of activists and leaders from those same buildings.

It’s the organizer’s job to help an unorganized community begin to challenge the status quo and business as usual, both with external decision-makers and within the community itself. Often there are taken-for-granted assumptions that human problems—the vacant lot covered with trash, the Department of Mental Health policy that doesn’t respect the rights of consumers to have informed consent for their medications—are inevitable and can’t possibly be changed. This is the mentality that “you can’t fight city hall.” It is the learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) born of disempowerment and oppression. When we forget or do not recognize that people create the social world, we lose all hope of remaking that world.

The organizer must set in motion a process whereby people break up such reified thinking (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Haggstrom (1971) described this process of dissolving collective distortions as “reality softening.” An organizer best can facilitate reality softening by asking fundamental questions that challenge accepted wisdom about social conditions and power relations. This is what Paolo Freire has termed a “pedagogy of the question” (1990). The organizer’s questions may help identify contradictions, “rub raw the sores of discontent” (Alinsky, 1969), and point to alternative visions and courses of action.

As a stranger, an outsider has a license to ask such questions, many of which might never occur to in-group members. Marginal status to the in-group may enable the outsider to notice things that are so taken-for-granted by community members that they remain virtually unperceived. It’s both logical and organizationally functional for outsider organizers to
question many of these assumptions. Appeals to community members’ self-interests, provocative questions, and the ability to generate a sense of hope that change is possible all help a skilled outsider to migrate more effectively between groups. Outsiders also may bring fresh ideas, creativity, and an understanding of the mentality of external decision-makers to the community.

**Experience and Interests.** The insider brings the lived experience of being a fellow community group member. This directly shared experience of everyday conditions, disempowerment, and injustice is the source of the insider’s greater knowledge and understanding described above. The insider experiences the constituency’s oppression at a gut level, not as an intellectual exercise. She or he has a personal stake in the group’s issues, which generates passion, energy, and commitment to the organizing effort. The mutual self-interest is easily understood by other group members, often making the insider’s motives and goals more clear. They are in the same boat as everyone else and part of the common struggle, sharing the same hopes, fears, and dreams.

However, the insider must take care not to become overly involved in a particular issue of personal concern. Such overidentification with a “pet issue” can lead to a loss of objectivity, burnout, lack of role clarity, and confusion about organizational goals. A community organizer always should operate consistently with two fundamental goals—helping members take collective action on immediate issues and building the organizational power base in preparation for future work. If the members are from a disempowered community, there is little doubt that other issues exist beyond the one presently at hand. The process of addressing the current issue should strengthen the organization by adding more members, developing the skills of the leadership, generating positive publicity, increasing the group’s credibility, expanding its resources, and forging relations with new allies. An overemphasis on resolving the organizer’s personal-stake issues can lead to inattention to these equally important organizational development goals. And the responsibility for organization building falls disproportionately on the organizer, since most members and leaders will be more focused on community issues than organizational development.

The outsider is less likely to fall into the personal-issues trap. Marginal status should help insure a measure of objectivity and attention to organization-building goals. Outsiders who are career community organizers may have valuable experience with a number of different groups and be able to contribute external examples of success. Outsiders often bring diversity of experience, a fresh outlook, creative ideas, and insights into the motives and methods of organizational targets. The new perspective and energy may be a stimulus for action.

However, the outsider clearly doesn’t have direct experience with the everyday conditions and oppression faced by community members. Unlike
insiders, they only understand these phenomena intellectually and from a distance. They may lack the passion and soul that often spring from painful lived experience. This can lead to a preoccupation with organization building at the expense of vigorously addressing the immediate issues that most concern members. Over the years, I’ve seen a number of outsider organizers fall into this pattern, almost always leading to serious problems. With a less immediate self-interest stake in the community, the outsider also may have to contend with questions about motives, goals, and commitment. Such questions must be answered while demonstrating solidarity with and loyalty to the constituency, being careful not to impose a set of outside interests on the community.

A final point should be made on the experience/interest dimension. Too often, there is a tendency to equate outsider status with professional training, sophisticated knowledge, and structured community-organizing experience. Likewise, insiders often are assumed to lack such education, theoretical grounding, and formal community-organizing experience. Such viewpoints even may be present in the insider’s own community group, where her or his ability and skills may not be fully recognized or respected. While disempowerment and discrimination may limit educational and employment opportunities for many members of these groups—including insider organizers—the assumption should not be made that this is the case. Clearly, good formal training and community-organizing experience will be assets to be factored in under this variable. But there is nothing in either status that assures or precludes that such theoretical and practical knowledge exists.

Relationships and Linkages. Collective action to address common concerns is the essence of community organizing, and interpersonal relationships are the foundation on which all organizing activities and processes rest. GCO members interact in group settings to identify and prioritize needs, set goals, prepare and implement action plans, negotiate with decision-makers, design programs, develop projects, resolve conflicts, evaluate results, and celebrate victories. Success or failure often turns on the quality of interpersonal relationships and interactional processes. It is the responsibility of the community worker to bring people together and to help facilitate productive group processes. The organizer’s ability to form good relationships with a wide range of people goes to the heart of these activities. And one’s status as insider or outsider certainly impacts the process of relationship building.

Insiders, by definition, already have contacts in the community and linkages to its resources. They don’t have to work through gatekeepers and power brokers. Instead, they can take a direct route to building community organization, reaching out to formal and informal leaders, while carefully avoiding grasing tips leaders who aren’t respected at the grassroots level. They also should be aware of the inevitable factions within the community—
who dislikes whom and how subgroups are aligned. The insider begins the organizing process with preestablished relationships and has the communicative advantage of homophile (Tully et al., 1994)—the phenomenon whereby those who are similar can better understand one another. This enables the insider to develop brand-new relationships both more easily and more quickly than the outsider.

On the other hand, insiders must negotiate several tricky dynamics and possible pitfalls. First, the insider’s personal history may come with some unpleasant baggage attached, especially if he or she has been politically active. For instance, insiders may have enemies or be perceived as aligned with a particular political faction—even when they attempt to stay neutral. Some community members may believe that organizers favor old friends, misusing the frequently disclaimed but very real power that organizers hold. In fact, there may be both the temptation as well as the social pressure to rely on personal friends. While this ready cohort of activists can be a real asset, care must be taken to avoid the appearance—or the reality—of a social clique. Some community members may resent the insider’s status as a paid worker, hoping to dislodge or replace her or him. Still others may try to discredit insiders, charging them with using the job as a stepping stone for personal career advancement. Most disturbing of all, a few may raise a question flowing from their own internalized oppression—“What can you know? You’re just like me.”

Making the transition from the role of community leader or activist to “organizer” often is not easy. I am reminded of a woman who was a dynamic leader with a strong neighborhood GCO. When she became a paid staffer, community members continued to look to her as a spokesperson and public leader. She didn’t want to combine the two roles as a leader-organizer, preferring instead to be an organizer working behind the scenes to develop other leaders. While she was very clear in her position, it wasn’t possible for her to play a facilitative background role in her own neighborhood due to the expectations of others. Ultimately, she became an effective community organizer in another city, while continuing to play a secondary leadership role in the community where she lived. While this was an extreme case, it illustrates some of the role pressures that an insider may face.

Other problems may arise when the insider attempts to set boundaries, drawing the line between work and personal life (Delgado, 1997). As community members, insiders almost always are available to other members. They may have difficulty “saying no” and maintaining sufficient personal space to prevent the burnout that can arise when always on call. The strong personal relationships that so often are a blessing for the insider may become a curse unless a role relationship as an organizer is established.

The outsider has almost the opposite set of circumstances and challenges. While insiders may worry about the complications of proximity
and a plethora of personal relationships, outsiders must overcome distance and detachment from the community. When building a new GCO, outsiders will require much more time than insiders, having to work through gatekeepers and needing to learn about factions, subgroups, and opinion leaders in the process. There’s the concern that the outsider’s relationships with community members will be viewed as superficial and instrumental—a means to an end, rather than established with the level of genuineness and trust captured in the Puerto Rican concept of *confianza* (Morales, 1995).

On the positive side, the outsider certainly has the automatic distance needed to separate private life from work responsibilities. He or she comes to the community with little personal baggage, such as preexisting enemies or ties to political factions. Provided that they take the time and effort to make a broad range of community contacts, outsiders are in a good position to be viewed as reasonably fair and impartial. They should be able to establish clear role relationships as organizers; and, over time, deeper personal relationships with group members will have the opportunity to develop and grow. The outsider also is more likely to have linkages to the power structure, as well as institutional resources. The ability to open up lines of communication with the community can be an asset, as long as the outsider doesn’t get drawn into the role of being an advocate or broker with external decision-makers. To do so would be a violation of the organizer role and disempowering to the community.

**Legitimacy and Trust.** The insider has obvious advantages and no significant obstacles for the process of establishing legitimacy and trust. By definition, they cannot be branded as “outside agitators” by opponents and enemies from the external power structure. While a few other members may be suspicious that the insider has the ulterior motive of moving up and out of the community, this concern usually can be dispelled by the worker’s demonstrated commitment and personal stake in the group’s goals. Automatic cultural competence will be a great asset. Most important, the insider is in fact a legitimate member of the community. Generally, this status brings with it a certain measure of trust, unless or until proven otherwise.

Outsiders must work hard to overcome a number of problems related to legitimacy and trust. They may be vulnerable to charges and challenges both from within and outside the community. *External* decision-maker targets who are threatened by and hostile to an organizing effort will be quick to seize on any opportunity to discredit it. They frequently will use the “outside agitator” label on non–community member organizers, especially when the GCO pressures them to make changes or concessions. Such accusations are made in bad faith and are often combined with the quasi-moral argument that the outsider is manipulating the community for some ulterior motive. This usually is a transparent effort to “divide and conquer” by pitting community members against their own staff.
Regardless of the accuracy of such charges, a response will be necessary. Clearly, the strongest rejoinder comes when community members take the lead in defending the outsider, defining her or his delimited role, and attesting to their own power within the GCO in the process. This type of rebuttal effectively puts allegations to rest and often helps the organizational leadership rally together in pride and solidarity. If the outsider organizer has done a good job, the group’s leadership can be expected to provide this type of defense. Timing will be a factor. Normally, confrontations with the power structure should not take place until a GCO’s leadership has had time to coalesce and jell.

On the other hand, the outsider must deal with legitimacy issues within the community at the very outset of work. Problems often will be more acute with communities of identity. Distrust and suspicion may be exacerbated when tensions already exist between the outsider’s own group and the community with which she or he works. Obviously, power differentials between the two groups, along with a history of exploitation and oppression, will be a barrier. For instance, most would agree that there is a history of experiences between African Americans and whites that does not engender trust (Shillington, Dotson, and Faulkner, 1994). However, given the competition and conflict between disempowered groups that get played off against one another by the dominant power structure, even outsiders from other marginalized groups may have to contend with a degree of mistrust.

Outsiders will need to build strong relationships with a critical mass of community members—especially opinion leaders—in order to overcome suspicion and distrust successfully. An Organizing Committee composed of such informal community leaders will help immensely in the early stages of work. Outsiders will need to develop a degree of cultural competency quickly and must avoid a “melting pot” mentality, which will lead them to ignore or underappreciate important distinct community values, norms, attitudes, customs, and behaviors (Bradshaw, Soifer, and Gutierrez, 1994). As in all community work, a key variable will be the outsiders’ ability to identify community members’ self-interests and to motivate them to participate in collective action. This process will take more time for the outsider than the insider, but with the requisite commitment, energy, persistence, and interactive skills, success is achievable in most instances. Still, there will be some communities that will not grant an outsider a true “license to operate” (Haggstrom, 1971).

While the potentials and problems of each status often mirror one another, there also are common themes that cut across both and have implications for organizing. Each can make errors of assumption about the communities where they work—outsiders from ignorance and insiders from presumption. Both can create dependency by doing too much for the
community and failing to build a strong enough power base with a solid core of leadership. Insiders and outsiders each have reasons why they may impose their own goals and agendas on the community. Neither is immune from acting like an expert. Self-awareness of one’s strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, and tendencies will be key for both.

I would argue that the organizer’s ability to work effectively is more important than the particular status of insider or outsider. That said, insiders generally have more advantages and fewer obstacles than outsiders. With hard work, the necessary knowledge and skill, and extra time, most outsiders can succeed with most groups. However, there clearly is a need to develop more insider community organizers from disempowered groups. I hope that the insider advantages and challenges discussed above will be of use to new community workers who hold that status. Little has been written on this subject, perhaps because the traditional assumption has been that the community organizer will be an outsider (Delgado, 1997). While this is a false premise, the community-organizing literature continues to be deficient in this area. The reality is that many more organizers are needed—both insiders and outsiders. Each brings assets and liabilities to the role. Each should know how to capitalize on her or his strengths while avoiding potential problems.

Final decisions on whether to hire, fire, promote, and demote insiders or outsiders should be left to the individual GCO. Their choices can be expected to vary according to group values, past experience with other workers from either status, and the interactive chemistry with the particular organizer. Groups will have differential sensitivity to the factors that I have explored, and reactions will vary over time. In the final analysis, each group must give a “thumbs up” or a “thumbs down” as to who’s in and who’s out as an organizer.

The organizer plays a role that is both necessary and widely misunderstood. Those who attempt the work often are disillusioned by failures. In order to succeed, they must be driven by a strong force such as idealism, love, or rage. Yet they also need to temper their passion with solid analytic ability. It takes a mixture of fire and ice, an optimistic spirit and a questioning mind. Most of us can do it. So don’t compromise or temporize. ORGANIZE!
INSIDER/OUTSIDER UPSIDES AND DOWNSIDES

Factors to Consider
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Knowledge and Perceptions
- Experiences and Interests
- Relationships and Linkages
- Legitimacy and Trust
Building an effective grassroots community organization requires a systematic methodology. An organizing model serves as the blueprint. Given the two approaches and four arenas discussed in Chapter 1, GCOs can take a variety of forms, consistent with the old adage that “structure should follow function.” In other words, the way in which an organization is created should be based on the goals and objectives that the membership wants to attain. The basic question “Who wants What from Whom, and How is this to be accomplished?” enables us to examine and analyze the workings of any GCO, regardless of the approach, arena, or various combinations of the two. Obviously, four different questions are embedded in this overview question, and a number of variables help unravel the answers.

And as this information is provided, a ten-dimensional framework emerges, including membership, leadership, staffing, structure, goals, target systems, strategy and tactics employed, finances, allies, and communications. A systematic organizing model for building a new GCO should attend to these ten variables. This framework serves two other functions. First, it gives a clear picture of how any GCO is set up, and provides ten variables along which it can be described to others. Second, it enables one to assess the group’s performance and to gauge the degree of organizational development attained. The discussion that follows will examine these two functions in turn along each dimension.

Who

Four elements can be considered to answer questions about “who” is taking action—membership, leadership, staffing, and structure.
Membership. The community or constituency “WHO” are served by an organization is a reasonable place to start. Is the GCO based on turf, identity, issue, or workplace? Obviously, the membership will vary according to the arena in which the organizing occurs. Are there membership dues or some other mechanism by which people sign up and enroll? How many people consider themselves to be members? Does the GCO utilize a direct membership model whereby people join as individuals/families, or is it constituted as an organization of organizations (O of O)—essentially a coalition—in which one is a member by virtue of participating in an affiliate group? Turf and issue organizations may utilize either direct membership or O of O models. On the other hand, most identity and workplace groups have individual members.

One advantage of the O of O format is that people already are involved in a component group. There’s no need to do primary recruitment by going door-to-door or making home visits to a list of potential members. When a person’s group joins the GCO, they automatically become a member. The recruitment process entails convincing the group’s leaders and a critical mass of its activists to make an organizational commitment to become part of the O of O. This can be quite efficient when there’s sufficient buy-in. Recruitment does not have to take place through a lengthy one-by-one process of persuading individuals to join.

For instance, in the congregation model, individual churches, synagogues, mosques, or temples are the unit of membership, and they deliver their congregants as organizational activists. That said, many individuals may have primary loyalty to their own affiliate organization rather than the O of O. Increasingly, O of Os employ “one-on-ones” with rank-and-file members to deal with this problem. These are individual meetings through which organizers, leaders, and committed members engage potential activists in mutual dialogue about values, interests, opinions, hopes, and fears with the express purpose of encouraging new folks to engage in organizational activity to achieve their goals.

Direct membership GCOs typically recruit people from scratch, because there’s no preexisting organizational base from which to draw people. Primary loyalty usually is not an issue, but the person power and time necessary to do individual recruitment does put a heavy demand on organizational resources. A variety of recruitment methods may be utilized, including “cold doorknocking,” targeted home visits, one-on-ones, housemeetings, networking, and presentations to captive audiences. Direct membership is effective in all four arenas and is particularly common in identity and workplace organizing, where there’s often not enough existent groups to utilize an O of O approach.

It’s useful to analyze involvement along dimensions of both breadth and depth—how wide is the base of membership and what’s the level of people’s engagement? In some instances, overall numbers of participants
may be strong, yet whole segments of the community (race, ethnicity, linguistic groups, religion, age, gender, social class, sexual orientation, tenants versus homeowners, physical or mental disability subgroups, or geographic subareas) may be underrepresented. And it’s critical to know how many people are actively involved as opposed to those whose commitment doesn’t go deeper than signing up, making a contribution, or simply adding their names to petitions and e-mails. Such “paper members” do not contribute to a GCO’s ability to turn out real people to take part in collective action or to do organizational work.

Attendance at organizational meetings, events, and actions is the simplest means of assessing levels of participation. However, even these numbers can be deceiving. A large crowd at a demonstration or rally may be more a function of mobilizing around a particularly pressing issue than real organizing; and if organizers don’t plug these new folks into the ongoing structure of the group, they may not return. Such “one-shot turnouts” are not in and of themselves a very accurate indicator of organizational participation, although when combined with solid follow-up work, they may be a very effective means of building the group’s base. What comes after a big mobilization will be key.

It is also not uncommon for grassroots community organizations to “live off their reputation” for prior constituency involvement and past effectiveness. While Alinsky (1971) long ago pointed out that the illusion of a group’s power often is more important than its actual strength, nevertheless, this phenomenon has its limits. GCOs are dynamic, with people leaving, dropping out, and disengaging for a variety of reasons on a regular basis. It is critical that they constantly engage in the recruitment of new activists around immediate, specific, and winnable issues with a compelling self-interest draw. Otherwise, these organizations quickly become shells of their former selves. Creating and maintaining broader and deeper levels of member involvement require an organizational commitment to a bottom-up, community-driven approach. Member participation will be strongest when the GCO’s issues and activities appeal deeply to the self-interests of potential activists from a wide cross-section of the community, the organization has structural access points where new folks can plug in, and recruitment, engagement, and retention activities are carried out on a regular basis by both staff and leaders.

Leadership. Given that community organizing rests on the assumption that constituency groups are capable of acting collectively on their own behalf, it logically follows that the people “WHO” provide leadership should be indigenous. The “O of O” model clearly is able to draw on experienced leaders from its component groups. Direct membership organizations often are developing new leaders who must learn the basics while on the job. But regardless of experience levels, almost all GCOs place great emphasis on leadership identification and development. Ideally, leaders
will be representative of the organization’s general membership. Leadership forms can range from a single individual in charge of all group affairs to several people sharing different roles to collective models in which, theoretically, all members are leaders. Leadership can be formal or emergent, and individuals may be first- or second-line leaders.

GCOs need to establish a division of roles and responsibilities between first- and second-line leaders, as well as the full membership. Charges and chores should be distributed so as to keep power dispersed within the organization. An organization’s top leaders usually hold formal positions, such as president, chairperson, secretary, or treasurer, while “second-line leaders” are not elected to office, although they may head key organizational committees. They are the core activists—regular participants in the group’s meetings, activities, and events. They are like industrious and indispensable “worker bees,” who implement the group’s policies, procedures, and plans.

Second-line leaders serve as links between the elected officers and the GCO’s rank-and-file members, often infusing the group with energy, creativity, and fresh perspectives. New first-line leaders often come from their midst, and they may offer a healthy challenge to long-term top leaders, who may have a tendency to become entrenched. Indeed, Robert Michels (1949), in a classic piece on organizational behavior, termed the tendency for power to become concentrated in the hands of a few leaders as “The Iron Law of Oligarchy.” Second-line leaders help forestall (or slow down) the occurrence of this phenomenon. It is the responsibility of the organizing staff to find and develop second-line leaders, and the importance of this task cannot be overemphasized.

Therefore, it is essential to include these secondary leaders in any training sessions in order to prevent this developmental process from widening the gap (of knowledge, skills, consciousness, and commitment) between the first-line leaders and the general membership. Educational, analytical, and skill-building sessions commonly include topics such as basic principles of organizing, the distinction between leader and staff roles, power analysis, recruitment techniques, mentoring less experienced leaders, conducting effective meetings, conflict resolution, researching community issues, strategic analysis, action planning, direct action tactics, countertactics of the opposition, negotiating skills, working with the media, fundraising, information technology, building coalitions, and organizational development.

Beyond the teaching of specific skills, leadership training also entails the development of a critical analysis of the inequitable distribution of wealth and power in society, knowledge about the dynamics of oppression, and an understanding of collective action as a means to bring about social change. Conscientization (Freire, 1973) enables organizational leaders to actively reflect about their personal life experience, to recognize similar
experiences shared by others, to develop a political critique of *systemic oppression*, and to prepare to act collectively to challenge and change the conditions of their lives. Effective leaders develop increased critical consciousness and an enhanced capacity for strategic analysis. The quality and quantity of a GCO’s indigenous leadership will be one of the key elements for assessing its effectiveness.

**Staffing.** A GCO may have one or more paid staff “WHO” function as organizers. Large organizations also may have support staff, researchers, policy analysts, legislative lobbyists, or fundraisers. A range of factors can be examined to gain a better understanding of staffing patterns, including numbers (also recent growth or attrition), demographics, insider/outside status, qualifications, experience, job performance, volunteers, interns, management, supervision, relationships with leaders and members, level of commitment, morale, staff cohesion and comradery, tenure, turnover, opportunities for growth, salaries, benefits, and personnel policies.

The previous chapter focused on the role of the organizer, and I will not repeat this discussion. But, regardless of the particular positions that staff might hold in larger GCOs, it is critical that they perform their jobs in a manner that is *consistent with the principles and goals intrinsic to the organizer role.* Clearly, developing and retaining a skilled and committed staff usually is essential for an organization’s long-term success. Assessment of how well staff are fulfilling their functions will be crucial when evaluating the effectiveness of any GCO.

**Structure.** This element provides the remaining information about “WHO” is taking action. It includes the organization’s membership structure, the level(s) at which it operates, as well as the division of roles and responsibilities among members, leaders, and staff. GCOs might be structured to operate within a workplace, school, prison, housing development, halfway house, neighborhood, electoral district, court jurisdiction, city, state, region, or nation. Larger organizations might have local chapters, members at large, or a combination of the two. The various configurations are too numerous to list, but some examples follow:

- ACORN is a national direct-membership, social action turf organization whose members are low and moderate income. It has chapters in major cities across the United States.
- Viet Aid is a direct-membership, community development identity organization whose members are Vietnamese residents in the Fields Corner neighborhood of Dorchester.
- Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) is an O of O, social action turf organization at the metropolitan level, whose membership draws from religious congregations, neighborhood groups, and labor unions.
• Chelsea Green Space is a citywide, direct-membership issue group that engages in both community development and social action and whose membership includes a wide cross-section of Chelsea residents.

• The Massachusetts Clubhouse Coalition (MCC) is a statewide, O of O, identity organization that engages in both community development and social action and draws its membership from mental health consumers and staff at thirty-three clubhouses.

• MoveOn is a national, issue-based, social action organization with an at-large direct membership drawn from a wide spectrum of U.S. society.

• Massachusetts Senior Action Council is a statewide, direct-membership, social action, identity/issue organization with both chapters and at-large members.

• Stop The Cuts is a statewide, social action issue coalition staffed by Neighbor To Neighbor and drawing organizational membership from health care organizations, labor unions, and community groups.

An organization’s structure also is composed of formal elected officer positions, standing and ad hoc committees, as well as the general membership. GCOs that only focus on several issues and activities do not need highly complex structures, while those involved in multiple projects should have a variety of committees to carry out the necessary work. Committees typically are either permanent or temporary, depending on the tasks to be accomplished. Long-term standing committees have the advantage of giving the organizational structure continuity and stability; there is minimal change in their membership over time. This relative permanence makes it possible for committee members to form a working team that can learn technical responsibilities together, such as finances, by-laws, or personnel policies, without constantly having to slow down while new activists master the learning curve.

Short-term ad hoc committees can be even more important, since they provide structural access points through which newcomers can become active. These temporary committees are appropriate for issue campaigns, special events, or time-limited activities, and new participants often first get involved at this level. Standing committees in these areas would make it more difficult for new people to plug into the group’s structure, since veteran activists might monopolize the positions of influence and responsibility. The structural permeability of ad hoc committees keeps a steady flow of fresh “new blood” flowing into the organization, serving as a mechanism to help prevent the occurrence of The Iron Law of Oligarchy. Utilizing co-chairs instead of single committee heads obviously doubles structural positions available for secondary leadership at this organizational level.

Temporary committees also are suitable for projects requiring members to have a higher degree of familiarity with the GCO, such as developing a
strategic plan, nominating new officers, or evaluating an organizational initiative. But whether short-term committee members are veterans or newcomers, these structures exist for a specific purpose and are disbanded when their work is complete. Correlating organizational structure with operational needs in this manner helps keep a GCO more dynamic and energized, avoiding standing committees that may fall dormant after or between campaigns and projects, contributing to an image of organizational inaction and decline in the process. It is critical that GCOs establish a good mix of standing and temporary committees in order to balance needs for both organizational continuity and vigor. Many groups tend to err on the side of stability, thereby contributing to the centralization of power and entrenched leadership.

Other relevant structural factors to consider include the group’s by-laws and official operating procedures. These usually specify the division of power and responsibility between officers, committees, and the general membership; the extent of centralization or decentralization; rules for decision making; quorum requirements; the frequency of elections; forming and dissolving committees; and membership involvement in this process. Other subjects to be covered include conflicts of interest, financial guidelines, staff responsibilities and rights, and the process for amending the bylaws. It’s also important to understand how the GCO’s structure and operating procedures first were established, its participation in larger coalitions, and its links to other organizations. The goal is an organizational structure that builds ownership and control while maintaining an open, flexible, action-oriented focus.

**What**

An analysis of the GCO’s goals and objectives helps answer a series of sub-questions about “WHAT” its purpose, mission, history, track record, opportunities, and challenges are.

**Goals and Objectives.** Any examination of this variable must look at the past, present, and future tenses—“WHAT” the organization has accomplished to date, its standing at this moment in time, and what it hopes to accomplish in the future. It is useful to begin with the organization’s age and history, the rationale for its creation, other groups that served as models or examples, key actors in its formation (initiators, allies, and opponents), and the process by which its initial mission and vision were established. Many organizations have a formal mission statement—a written declaration of purpose and goals. The very process of creating a mission statement can be an excellent exercise for a GCO, since it requires a clear and thoughtful articulation of the group’s rationale for existence and the long-term aspirations of its members. When mission statements never were developed or become outdated, it is often beneficial either to create
them or to revisit the existing ones. This activity can help a GCO become more focused and strategic about what it hopes to accomplish.

However, regardless of the presence of formal mission statements, a grassroots community organization needs to be clear about both its long- and middle-range goals, as well as its immediate objectives. It is important to analyze whether they are realistic and feasible, as well as how the organization expects to achieve them. **Long-Range Goals** are overarching statements about desirable circumstances, such as developing recreational opportunities, creating affordable housing, improving health care, pursuing environmental justice, increasing electoral clout, or providing relief from predatory lending. **Middle-Range Goals** are more concrete, such as establishing swimming facilities at the neighborhood level, developing affordable housing on city-owned parcels of vacant land, reducing health disparities in a particular neighborhood or among a specific ethnic group, cleaning up all dangerous environmental spills on the south side of the city, undertaking initiatives to register voters and increase voter turnout, or targeting unscrupulous lenders and indifferent regulators.

**Objectives** are measurable outcomes within a specified time period—opening a new swimming pool by the end of the school year; fifty units of affordable housing built by next New Year’s Day; reducing infant mortality by 20 percent within two years; forcing the EPA to clean up three different Brownfields in a low-income neighborhood of color within one year; registering 5,000 new voters before the fall Primary and increasing voter turnout by 10 percent at the subsequent election; or establishing a $50 million Foreclosure Avoidance Program by June, providing relief to borrowers behind on their payments and at risk of losing their homes. Accomplishing Objectives moves an organization further along the path toward achieving Intermediate Goals, which, in turn, links to reaching Long-Range Goals.

GCOs conduct Social Action or Community Development campaigns to meet their goals and objectives using a variety of strategies and tactics (see discussion under “How” below) to influence relevant targets (see “Whom,” which appears next). **Action Plans** lay out a series of steps to carry out a campaign’s strategies and tactics. Campaigns may be undertaken to accomplish a single objective, such as getting a stoplight at a particular dangerous intersection, or to attain broader Middle-Range Goals, like increasing traffic safety on the three busiest streets in the neighborhood. Some campaigns may be very ambitious and complex, with multiple targets, objectives, and phases, such as ACORN’s campaign against Household Finance, which is detailed in Chapter 5.

A GCO’s track record of undertaking campaigns to realize its goals and objectives, as well as its progress toward establishing a power base (organizational mileage), will be essential to consider. The group’s successes and failures on issue campaigns, initiatives, programs, projects, activities, and events all should be assessed. What has worked, what has not, and why?
Any analysis should look closely at a number of variables, including the group’s level of credibility—both externally and within its own community—the primary obstacles to goal attainment and what has been done to overcome them, past mistakes, and unexpected outcomes impacting the GCO’s work positively or negatively. The development of a strong power base is captured by the dimensions discussed in this framework: active community involvement; capable first- and second-line leadership; able and dedicated staff; a functional, efficient, and participatory organizational structure; significant realization of goals and objectives; the ability to engage productively with both community members and institutional decision-makers; the capacity to utilize an assortment of strategies and tactics; diversified and secure finances; staunch, dependable allies; and open internal and effective external communication processes.

**From Whom**

GCOs are formed to bring about social change. Collective action by community members results in improvements, the elimination of problems, the creation of new programs, the passage of legislation, and systemic reforms. The Target System is the GCO’s focal point of action “WHOM” the organization engages, activates, and influences to bring about the desired changes.

**Target Systems.** Target systems may be internal or external, depending on the organizing approach utilized. Relations between a GCO and its target systems are a critical variable in determining its effectiveness.

**Internal.** Whether a GCO takes a Community-Development or a Social-Action approach, it needs to establish a positive reputation and credibility among its own constituency. Both approaches entail high levels of participation and collective action, so in a very real sense, community members are “targeted” to become involved. A successful GCO must be able to build strong relationships with potential activists and then have the capacity to motivate these folks to become involved in organizational campaigns and activities. The group’s fortunes will rest on a solid foundation of community “buy-in” and investment.

**External.** While Community Development has an internal focus on self-help activities, as discussed in Chapter 1, this approach may be combined with efforts to enlist the assistance of external institutions (e.g., municipal government, a state bureaucracy, a public school department, and private businesses) in collaborative ventures or partnerships. On the other hand, Social Action combines mobilization within the community with pressure directed at external decision-makers. Typically, institutions are “targeted” and pushed to change their policies, procedures, or practices to better meet the interests of community members.

When Social Action is undertaken, it is important to distinguish between opponents and targets. Anyone who is against the group’s goals and
objectives (the “what”) can be categorized as an opponent. Targets are chosen because they can make decisions that help the organization realize its ends; they are the “whom” that can deliver the goods.

Targets are the persons and institutions you act against. Not everyone in the opposition is a worthwhile target; some may be too inaccessible, too powerless, or too peripheral to the resolution of the issue. However, there might be other players who are not necessarily opposed to your campaign—they might be neutral or favorable—but who may influence the outcome in your favor. These are known as “indirect targets.” (Katz, 1980, p. 4)

A GCO’s relationships with external institutions may vary, depending on the organizational change effort. Thus, a more highly developed group will be able to work with the same decision-maker simultaneously and differentially on several issues or projects, collaborating on one, persuading and advocating on another, and perhaps even contesting on a third. The ability to establish and maintain such complex relationships with external target systems is an indicator of organizational maturity and sophistication.

How

Four dimensions should be examined to understand “HOW” a GCO goes about attempting to achieve its mission and goals—strategy and tactics, finances, allies, and communications.

Strategy and Tactics. Strategies are methods designed to influence targets to act in a manner that enables an organization to achieve its goals and objectives. Tactics are specific procedures, techniques, and actions employed to implement strategic approaches. There can be internal strategies to engage and motivate community members to take collective action, as well as external ones designed to convince or coerce organizational targets to act as the group wishes. If a strategy is like a stairway to get from one floor to another, tactics are like the individual stairs. Together, they help answer questions about “HOW” success will be achieved on specific change efforts.

Strategies can be conceptualized in three categories—collaborative efforts, persuasive campaigns, or adversarial contests (Warren, 1975). In actual practice, a continuum exists. A degree of persuasion may be necessary to secure the collaboration of city hall in developing a new youth center. The strategy to convince legislators to pass a bill for immigrant rights may be seen as persuasive by some and adversarial by others. Community Development tends to utilize collaborative strategies, but often includes moderate persuasive campaigns. Social Action applies a degree of pressure to the persuasion and frequently entails adversarial contests. Strategies draw on the Ten Tools for Taking Power outlined in Chapter 1. Thus, strategies
often are based on self-help, persuasive arguments, political consciousness raising, legislative enforcement and change, positive or negative publicity, electoral power, affecting appointments, consumer power, or disruption.

Tactics are very specific activities utilized to put a degree of pressure on an internal or external target. They may be quite mild, such as reminder phone calls to potential participants, food and music provided as an incentive at a community cleanup day, or tenants providing housing authority officials a “hero opportunity” to publicly announce a joint initiative to open a new childcare center on-site in an empty basement space. They also can be as adversarial as sit-ins, squatting, or blocking traffic. Tactics are almost limitless, but should be employed within the context of and consistent with the particular strategy that is developed and implemented. Thus, within a legislative strategy to pass a Utilities Shut-off Prevention Bill, a GCO might employ the following tactics: release of a study documenting recent increases in the costs of natural gas and the number of households with service terminated in the past six months, educational meetings with state legislators, a press conference to announce the filing of the Shut-off Bill, a rally outside the corporate offices of the major gas provider for the capital city, and large turnout and testimony at the legislative hearing for the bill. When social action targets resist a GCO’s change effort, they usually employ countertactics, which in turn can be counteracted (see Chapter 5).

Strategic analysis and the development of effective tactics are such critical activities that the next two chapters are devoted to this subject, so this section has been kept brief. However, when assessing a GCO’s utilization of strategies and tactics, a few questions can be asked:

- Does the organization understand the dynamics of community development versus social action, as well as the appropriate strategic continuum from collaboration to confrontation?
- How often have the various types of strategies been used, and with what results?
- Have errors been made using strategies and tactics that either were too weak or too militant?
- What new strategic and tactical abilities and skills have organizational members, leaders, and staff developed?
- Is the GCO able to mix, match, and modify its tactics as needed?
- Has the group learned to overcome common countertactics from resistant targets?

Finances. Without solid funding, no grassroots community organization will be stable. Where and how an organization raises its capital resources influences every facet of its operations. Clearly, this relates to
“HOW” the group develops and maintains organizational capacity. Money for organizing may come from public (federal, state, county, municipal) or private sources, including foundations, churches, businesses, contracts, private donors, or grassroots efforts. Capital will be needed to pay for staff, office rental, utilities, equipment, supplies, transportation, newsletters, printed materials, mailings, and a range of other organizational expenses.

Ideally, finances will be adequate and somewhat diversified, so that “all eggs are not in one basket.” Single-source funding makes any organization vulnerable to the whims and constraints of the funder. It is a truism in community organizing that a GCO never should take money with “strings attached” that can be used to leverage control, containment, and co-optation. Remember the old adage, “Whoever pays the piper calls the tune.” Social Action organizations must be especially careful. Funds should not be accepted from potential targets, unless a GCO is prepared to lose that money rather than compromise on its goals, strategies, and tactics. Generally speaking, that eliminates most government and corporate sources. Exceptions might occur when an organization receives funding that is insulated from interference and largely paid in advance, but even then a GCO should not be seduced into significant dependence on this source. Rather, it immediately should make plans to replace these monies with more independent and stable funds. With this kind of insurance against the loss of funding, the organization is free to run as far and as fast with the money as possible—while it’s still available.

It is desirable to raise as great a portion of the budget as possible internally from sources such as dues, door-to-door canvassing for contributions, and a variety of grassroots fundraising projects (such as raffles, banquets, dances, carnivals, bake sales, ad books, or potluck suppers). Internal fundraising not only protects the organization from external interference but also, more importantly, gives the membership a greater sense of ownership and control. It’s worth remembering, though, that even this type of fundraising has profound effects on the functioning of the GCO. An emphasis on membership dues, for instance, necessitates stressing collection techniques and quotas; canvassing for donations requires issues and a style appealing to a wide range of potential contributors (often middle class); and grassroots fundraising projects may monopolize large blocks of staff and leadership time. Indeed, almost every type of fundraising has some form of organizational costs, whether it’s administrative management, restrictions, requirements, reporting, performance evaluations, or time and resource demands. All of the above variables should be considered when making an assessment of a GCO’s finances.

Allies. Community organizing brings people together to maximize the strength of numbers, but there are limits to any GCO’s power and influence. Some groups may function as local chapters of larger citywide, regional, state, or national organizations. In such instances, they can join
together with other chapters in organizing campaigns directed at government or corporate targets that operate at levels beyond the local neighborhood. Nevertheless, “HOW” these “parent organizations” frequently expand their clout is by bringing multiple organizations together, either in a loose alliance or a formal coalition. The distinction between these two organizational forms is important. An alliance exists when two or more organizations join together to work on a common goal. The member organizations retain their individual identity and autonomy. Often, but not always, one particular organization may head the change effort, with other GCOs “signing on” to support the lead group’s campaign. In some situations, there may be a longstanding alliance around shared interests, but in all cases, the individual alliance members continue to operate as separate organizations while helping one another in a variety of ways, including public statements of support; shared information, expertise, contacts, equipment, and resources; or producing members and leaders to participate in actions, events, and activities.

On the other hand, a coalition has its own organizational structure; it is an organization composed of preexisting organizations and requires a higher level of commitment from its members. When a GCO joins a coalition, it gives up a measure of independence, entering a structural relationship where it shares decision-making power with other members about specific change objectives to pursue, how many participants each group will produce for various events, which organizations’ leaders will be public spokespeople, the strategies and tactics utilized, how the coalition will be staffed, the resources that each member will contribute, who will deal with the media, who will speak with funders, and a host of other matters.

The potential benefits of joining alliances or coalitions include the additional legitimacy and clout that comes with greater numbers of people involved, the ability to reach a wider population, the capacity to deal with larger and more complex issues, the reduction of duplication and competition, unity, community building, shared information and expertise, diversity of perspectives, the experienced leadership available from some group participants, opportunities for leadership development, shared training, possible linkages to institutional decision-makers, staff assistance, better media coverage, more pooled resources and funding, and improved access to donors.

However, such positive returns do not always accrue, and a range of negative consequences often do ensue, including the experience that participating organizations are giving up more than they gain, loss of autonomy, undependable partners, the “baggage” (e.g., reputation, enemies, lack of credibility, and difficult personalities) that may come with some members, conflicting group interests and agendas, differential investment, disputes over leadership, cumbersome or controversial decision-making processes,
“watered-down” strategies and tactics so as not to alienate some members, a drain on staff and resources, complicated internal and external communications, loss of identity and credit, disputes over fundraising (member GCO versus the coalition), and difficulty evaluating success. While the second list may be longer (both are illustrative rather than exhaustive), the reasons for GCOs to work together are compelling. With proper ground rules and guidelines, alliances or coalitions often make sense (see articles in Chapter 7 by Sampson and by Mizrahi and Rosenthal for a more in-depth discussion about coalitions). Any assessment of a GCO’s development should include a close look at its relations with various forms of allies.

**Communications.** A GCO’s ability to communicate effectively internally, externally, and “in between” also will be a critical variable in “how” it carries forth its work. Internal communication processes encompass the information flow within the group’s structure. This includes the manner in which members and leaders are informed about a wide variety of organizational activities, events, and decision-making processes. The lines of communication should be open and inclusive, flowing in a two-way fashion rather than top-down from the leadership—or, worse yet, the staff. Potential members fall between the internal and external levels. As individuals who share a common **interest domain**, they are tacit “insiders,” but since they haven’t yet committed to join the GCO, they remain as “outsiders.”

The capacity of a GCO to get its message out to these prospective recruits is crucial to its fortunes and entails internal communications (word of mouth, networking, mailings, telephone calls, small community meetings, and newsletters), the “in-between” level (larger community forums, local media, brochures, e-mail listservs, and presentations in the community), and the external (large public actions and events, major media outlets, videos/documentaries, and books). External communications also will be essential for a GCO to get its opinions, positions, and platforms out to a wide assortment of audiences, including allies, opponents, third parties, and the general public. It’s instructive to look closely at a GCO’s levels and methods of communication as part of any organizational assessment.

These ten dimensions enable anyone to gain a basic understanding about who is involved with a GCO, what it is attempting to accomplish, its target systems, and how it goes about its work. Taken together, they also make it possible to assess the degree of organizational development attained. At different points in time, some dimensions may move to the foreground, while others retreat to the background—for instance, during a recruitment drive, an election for officers, a large social change effort, or a funding crisis. But each is important in its own right, and taken together, they offer a clear picture of any GCO.
THE ORGANIZING PROCESS

At this point, it’s useful to go into some detail to illustrate a particular method for building new organizations. Given that there are multiple models and blueprints to create them, there is no one set organizing methodology. This book will not attempt to cover all the possibilities. But an in-depth illustration of one process for establishing a GCO should be instructive. Readers can decide for themselves the extent to which this model can be generalized and modified to fit other situations or how much is specific to the circumstances that I describe.

I will be laying out a process for building a direct-membership, neighborhood, turf organization that may engage in either community development or social action. It could have either single- or multi-issue goals. There is an assumption that a “shared leadership” structure will be created, whereby power is not concentrated in the hands of just a few people, and recruitment to ensure a steady supply of new activists will be an ongoing activity. The model is designed to create a broad-based organization with a strong emphasis on participatory democracy and active membership involvement. There’s also an assumption that a paid organizer—either an insider or an outsider—will be present.

I believe that this direct-membership model easily can be modified for GCOs in the issue, identity, or workplace arenas. In fact, this approach has its roots in the “Boston Model” originally utilized by the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization, an issue/identity GCO. It’s deliberately simple and universal enough to be easily replicated, making it possible to develop comparable chapters within a larger citywide, state, or national structure. For instance, ACORN has employed a variation of this model to build a powerful national organization of low- and moderate-income people with chapters in at least forty states.

On the other hand, the formation of an O of O or a coalition is very different from building a direct-membership organization. Creating these structures involves a series of steps designed to entice preexisting GCOs to buy into the new umbrella organization. The organizing process for an O of O often culminates in a “people’s convention” or a “community congress.” A direct-membership organizing drive features systematic, one-by-one recruitment of individuals or families leading to an organizational formation meeting. While there are many similarities in the ways that these different types of organizations carry out their work, the particular methods and skills utilized to build them obviously will vary. This section will be confined to a direct-membership model.

My approach has developed over the past thirty-five years and draws heavily from my personal experience with the Boston Model in the National Welfare Rights Organization, with neighborhood organizing in Los
Angeles with Warren Haggstrom, as an organizer and regional staff director for Massachusetts Fair Share (statewide), as lead trainer for ACORN’s Institute for Social Justice, with the Committee for Boston Public Housing, and as a trainer and consultant with scores of turf, issue, and identity GCOs in a wide variety of locations across the United States and abroad. Few of the techniques set forth here were developed solely by me. Rather, they represent an amalgamation of the ideas and methods of a number of highly skilled organizers with whom I’ve had the opportunity to work.* Therefore, this organizing model bears a strong resemblance to a number of others that also work very well. While the specific methods may vary, there are common basic principles for organizing and moving people into action that are present in all successful models. Accordingly, this section can be read on two levels—as a general outline of key principles or as a step-by-step guide for a particular organizing model that has a long and strong track record of success.

**The Model: Groundwork, Organizing Committee, Recruitment, and Formation**

This organizing model has four distinct phases:

1. **Groundwork:** During the first phase of the organizing process, organizers gather basic information about the community and begin analyzing the power dynamics at work within it.

2. **Developing an Organizing Committee (OC):** An initial core group is needed to provide leadership and direction for the organizing effort. If the organizer is an “insider,” the process of pulling together such a group is fairly straightforward. Outsiders will find it necessary to go through several additional steps—first talking with community “gatekeepers” to convince them of the merits of creating a GCO, obtaining a “contact list” of potential OC members from them, then visiting and recruiting some of these folks, plus new contacts identified in “snowball” fashion.

3. **General Recruitment Drive:** A systematic recruitment is launched with the active support and participation of the Organizing Committee members.

4. **Formation Meeting:** The organizing drive culminates with a formation meeting where temporary leadership is elected and organizational action is planned.

*The partial list includes Bruce Thomas, Bill Pastreich, Wade Rathke, Kris Ockershauser, Warren Haggstrom, Mark Splain, Barbara Bowen, Mary Ellen Smith, and Mary Lassen. Most importantly, this model flows from the knowledge and techniques developed by the legendary Fred Ross.
The initial phases of this model, in particular, are critical to the success of any organizing effort, providing legitimization, an initial leadership core, the identification of key issues in the neighborhood, and an opportunity to neutralize potential opposition. Depending on whether the organizer is an insider or an outsider, the first two phases usually take between two and six weeks. If some combination of door-to-door recruitment, individual meetings, housemeetings, networking, and group presentations is used, the general recruitment phase will take another six to eight weeks, depending on the size of the community and the number of people doing the recruiting. These figures are somewhat flexible; however, six to eight weeks of general recruitment seems to be the maximum time that an organizing drive can continue without the loss of critical momentum.

When knocking on doors to build a turf organization, most organizers will be able to average between thirty and forty doors per day, or roughly 200 per six-day week. So, 1,000 to 1,500 doors per organizer during the course of a recruitment drive is a realistic figure. Typically, neighborhoods of more than 4,000 doors usually don’t hang together very well and pose the danger of becoming “paper organizations” unless there’s more staff for ongoing doorknocking. On the other hand, areas of less than 500 doors may be too small to produce adequate leadership numbers and membership dues potential.

Issue and identity organizing also may utilize doorknocking, but often employs home visits or individual meetings with potential members (e.g., seniors, welfare recipients, and ethnic group members), as does workplace organizing. The methodology could be different with other constituencies, such as youth, deinstitutionalized mental health consumers, or LGBT community members, focusing on face-to-face recruitment in places where potential activists might be found, such as youth centers, street corners, basketball courts, and parking lots; mental health programs, clubhouses, and residential facilities; or LGBT clubs, businesses, restaurants, or residential areas, respectively. Active involvement of OC members in these recruitment efforts would be especially helpful. And organizing in these other arenas frequently will entail recruiting from a much smaller base of potential members. So, four or five individuals might be recruited per day, compared to the 30–40 daily interactions an organizer might have when doorknocking. But the general principle is the same, use face-to-face recruitment methods in natural settings where potential members are accessible and feel comfortable interacting.

**Groundwork**

Before beginning the organizing process, it is wise to gather some very basic information. Many organizers call this process a “power analysis.” The work will be very different for outsiders who are starting with only
minimal knowledge, as opposed to insiders, who already will know much of this information. Nevertheless, it is important to look very closely and systematically, challenging preconceived ideas and suppositions as appropriate. The key is to see what can be, not simply what is. During the Groundwork phase for a turf organization, I attempt to gain basic information about the following:

**Turf.** What are the natural boundaries of the potential organizing area? Are there obvious physical boundaries such as a highway, major street, railroad track, or industrial area? What are the church parish boundaries or the areas designated for various government programs and development projects? How does this area mesh with the rest of the city? Political jurisdictions (congressional, state legislative, ward, precinct, city council, and so on) also may be relevant, although such districts frequently are gerrymandered contrary to neighborhood lines. Ultimately these boundaries will have to be squared with how the residents themselves define “the neighborhood,” but it is important to understand the interface with other districts and geopolitical lines.

**Demographics.** Insiders start with a pretty good sense of “who’s who,” although impressionistic data may not always be completely accurate. Outsiders usually enter the community with inadequate information about population patterns and trends. In either case, some systematic analysis is in order. Using basic statistics, reading (both current and historical), and talking with knowledgeable people are valuable to get a sense of basic demographic trends and characteristics. A number of questions are relevant. Who currently lives in the community? How have these statistics evolved over the years, and are they likely to change in the future? What is the composition along dimensions such as race, ethnicity, social class, age, gender, family composition, and religion? What important identity communities may be present (e.g., LGBT, refugees and immigrants, mental health consumers, university students, homeless people, deaf and hard of hearing, artists, or religious groups)? Who is moving in or out of the neighborhood? Is the area becoming gentrified, or are more low-income people moving in? What is the mix of tenants and homeowners, and is it changing? Do landlords tend to occupy their own properties, or are they increasingly absentee? Dozens of such questions should be asked and answered in order to understand the potential constituency and the implications for organizing.

There are multiple data sources, including the U.S. Census; state, county, and municipal governments; redevelopment and housing authorities; and various human services agencies and programs that serve particular populations. Remember that such data typically undercount people in low-income areas and many ethnic groups—especially newcomers and people who are undocumented. Accurate statistics for homeless individuals, youth involved in gangs, sexual orientation, and physical or mental disabilities will be particularly elusive, and typically will not be
found in official data sets. But street outreach workers, social clubs, health centers, community leaders, and human service agencies/programs can help fill in the missing information. The objective is to get a reasonably accurate demographic picture, with an eye toward organizing the whole area or identity communities within it.

**Key Institutions.** It is critical to understand how a host of different institutions impact the community. A partial list includes local government bodies, public schools, housing authorities, churches, large employers, banks, hospitals, health clinics, universities/colleges (when present), newspapers, and other media outlets. I will not attempt to present an exhaustive list of standard questions about key institutions. Obviously, it is critical to learn about the structures, budgets, and decision-making processes in any institutions that the GCO is likely to target. Each organizing situation is unique, and one question invariably leads to another. The primary purpose of this activity is finding potential organizing issues and targets or possible sources of support. Local churches often will be especially helpful in providing various forms of assistance. In a very real sense, GCOs continually monitor the performance of institutions and regularly assess their relationships with them. The analysis that takes place during groundwork simply initiates this ongoing process.

**Community-based Organizations and Agencies.** The list includes unions, church groups, senior citizens' clubs, neighborhood associations, merchants' groups, political organizations, social groups, and the multitude of service agencies. The list of organizations may be quite extensive. It's important to look first for potential support; however, various forms of competition also are an unfortunate possibility. The new GCO will be interacting with these other organizations and agencies for the rest of its existence. It's essential to get the lay of the land and to establish positive relationships wherever possible.

**Powerful Actors.** Who are the movers and shakers—the variety of people who head up key institutions and organizations/agencies, or who fill various roles as brokers, gatekeepers, leaders, and people of influence? Examples might include public officials, civic leaders, landlords, key people from the business sector, developers, large employers, clergy, human service workers, community leaders, and other power brokers. From this list will come potential allies, opponents, targets, people to neutralize, and perhaps even some participants in the GCO.

**Existing Issues.** Usually a new organization will not get involved in a longstanding issue that already has produced leaders and some measure of organization. Exceptions are possible here, but the main purpose in studying these issues is to learn more about who and what are the major forces in the community.

**Potential Issues.** People will be recruited largely around specific issues. These issues invariably spring from social problems that produce hardship,
injustice, dissatisfaction, and anger. The organizer helps people create a structure and a strategy to overcome these problems. The process of issue selection is discussed at much greater length later; at this point, it’s sufficient to say that during the Groundwork stage, organizers look at social conditions in an attempt to find problems that can be remedied by future organizational campaigns.

The best organizers (whether they are insiders or outsiders) can spot the contours of future issues on a political landscape that are indistinguishable to the untrained eye. As the organizing drive progresses, organizers should sharpen and test these issues with the emerging leadership, who make the final decisions for action.

**Objective Conditions and Political Trends.** This is a very broad area covering every level of influence—from the impact of new development projects in the neighborhood to the national political climate. The analysis aims to determine what is possible for the organization to accomplish given conditions and trends at different levels over which it has little or no control. These conditions make it possible to accomplish more in certain spheres of activity and less in others at any given time. Thus, an organizational campaign to expand city services in a neighborhood might be less than successful if conducted in the face of a 25 percent cutback in city expenditures. Conversely, the local branch of a corporation that’s been cited for discriminatory hiring patterns might be vulnerable to an organizational campaign to win jobs for minority residents. Some examples are obvious and others more subtle. During the Groundwork phase, the organizer begins the never-ending process of analyzing these conditions and trends and projecting the potential issue campaign possibilities.

Conceivably, this Groundwork stage could take months to complete. Communities are dynamic entities, and as such constantly must be reexamined and reanalyzed. However, most organizing efforts operate under the realities of tight scheduling and do not have the luxury of long periods of study. In any case, the most relevant knowledge about a community will come as its members begin to engage in dialogue about their hopes, fears, and concerns. Whether the organizers are insiders or outsiders, the Groundwork stage usually can be completed within six to eight weeks, and more quickly when necessary. The need to gather more information should not become a reason for postponing organizational activity, causing an “analysis paralysis.”

Taking all the information gathered during Groundwork, organizers now are ready to begin the process of developing an Organizing Committee.

**The Organizing Committee**

An Organizing Committee (OC) is a working group (typically twelve to fifteen people) that provides direction and leadership for the general
Can’t You Hear Me Knockin’?  

The committee gives visible legitimation to the organizing effort, actively recruits new members, helps neutralize potential opposition, begins to define the first issues, and provides an initial leadership core that works together with the organizers to build the new GCO. It is critical for OC members to develop a true sense of loyalty to and ownership of the organization. They should have an ego investment in its success, actively promote the effort, and defend it if questioned or challenged by various opponents.

Members of the OC should be well-known and highly respected within their own community. They set the tone that will be established for the GCO. It is important that they be willing to share power with other emerging leaders and that they embrace an action-oriented, democratic approach that features broad-based, bottom-up participation by the group’s membership. And it is also essential that they make a commitment to work actively to build the new organization. Their presence on the OC helps establish credibility for the developing GCO, but more than their name is needed. The active involvement of a strong, dedicated Organizing Committee dramatically increases the likelihood that the effort will get off to an excellent start.

Clearly, this is the point where organizers exercise their greatest power within the GCO, because they play a major role in identifying potential OC members and then inviting specific individuals to join this committee. At this early stage, organizers definitely are playing a leadership role as they take the initiative to launch a new GCO. A viable Organizing Committee fills this initial leadership void and helps move organizers out of this role. For insiders, who already have multiple contacts and relationships within the community that’s organizing, creation of an OC is a fairly direct process of reaching out to people whom they think would make a valuable contribution to this body. During the course of doing this recruiting, they also should ask for the advice and suggestions of community gatekeepers and opinion leaders, as well as “snowball” contacts from the new OC members. But essentially, building an Organizing Committee is a one-step process for insiders.

On the other hand, a two-step procedure is necessary for outsiders who start without many initial contacts with community members. The next section describes how outsiders can work through community gatekeepers to begin the process of gaining entry to the community, developing a list of potential OC members to meet with in the process.

**Gatekeepers.** How do outsiders find such people when they don’t know many or any community members? It is advisable for them to work through community gatekeepers to develop a contact list of possible OC members to visit. By gatekeepers, I mean individuals who have the power either to allow or to prevent new people and ideas from reaching a group. Since each community contains various formal and informal groups, it
follows that a number of gatekeepers will be in any neighborhood. The gatekeeper is not necessarily a part of the in-group, but rather acts as an intermediary between it and the outside world. The same person may serve as a gatekeeper for several groups simultaneously. Typical examples would include members of the clergy, social service workers, visiting nurses, Head Start coordinators, legal service attorneys, and settlement house staff. The organizer also should remember that some of these potential gatekeepers may be actively disliked in the community and therefore not really function in this role. So, it’s important to check them out and to start with the most trusted people. Gatekeepers are respected by group members and leaders to the point where they can introduce new people and ideas.

While gatekeepers can help the outsider gain access to a particular group in the community, they cannot give true legitimization to the organizing effort. Such a “license to operate” must come from the key opinion leaders within a particular group. Therefore, the outside organizer approaches gatekeepers with an eye to the future, hoping to enlist their support in gaining access to various formal and informal community groups. Starting a new organization may upset some people or raise a lot of questions about the organizer’s motives. It is critical that gatekeepers view the new GCO as trustworthy and legitimate. The outsider will have to present credentials along with the reasons why the effort is beginning. Gatekeepers should be clear that GCO members will control organizational decisions and policy. Outside organizers should emphasize that their role will not entail being leaders.

As in everything he or she does, the organizer has a strategy for approaching these people. Building on the information gained during the Groundwork phase, he or she determines which contacts potentially will give active support, who simply will be sources of information, as well as who needs to be neutralized. The organizer then determines the best sequence for visiting these people. There is a need to build positive momentum; it makes sense to approach several of the more likely supporters first before taking on some of the potential skeptics.

Since there is still a need to gain more knowledge about the neighborhood, the more sophisticated contacts should be saved until all possible basic information has been gathered from the easily approachable gatekeepers. This insures the most efficient use of the limited time with the “heavyweights,” enabling outsiders to avoid superficial questions, gain subtle insights, and project the organizing effort as serious and significant.

Meetings are set up either in person or over the phone. At least 30–45 minutes should be allowed, so whenever organizers are simply popping in on someone, they should make sure there’s adequate time to meet. Organizers never should enter any meeting without a clear agenda consisting of both a goal and a game plan to achieve it. Regardless of what takes place in the meeting (except when the plan must be altered in
midstream) it is important never to lose sight of this goal. As former United Farm Workers organizer Bill Pastreich always says, “Keep your eyes on the grape.”

The meeting usually follows a clear pattern and sequence, which I’ll divide somewhat arbitrarily into four phases: **credentialing, discovery, the vision, and the commitment**. These terms, like others in this book, are used as an attempt to label (and thereby simplify) various concepts and activities in the organizing process—not to mystify them. To the extent that the reader develops a shared meaning of these terms, we will have a working language of organizing. Such a language makes it possible to discuss the organizing process more efficiently, using one word in place of several sentences. Some of the terms I use are fairly universal to community organizing, while others are my own personal shorthand. (Uller, 1970, for instance, uses the terms “credentialing,” “digging the issue,” “brain picking,” and the “pitch” to describe similar activities in his excellent paper on house-meetings.)

**Credentialing** takes place when outside organizers introduce themselves and the new GCO. Through the process of **discovery**, the outsider attempts to learn as much as possible about the neighborhood issues and the gatekeeper. An organizational **vision** is laid out to generate interest and excitement, and finally a specific **commitment** is sought. While these phases may overlap or subsequently repeat themselves in various combinations, the following outline should give a fairly accurate picture of the dynamics of a gatekeeper meeting. It should be remembered that the primary goal will be access to community leaders through the gatekeeper’s contacts, with secondary goals of support (letters of endorsement, space to hold meetings, publicity in newsletters, and so on) and information (greater depth in the areas covered during Groundwork).

**Credentialing**. The logical question raised by the presence of an outsider organizer at the gatekeeper’s door is, “Who are you and what do you want?” Credentialing is the process by which outsiders answer this question, introducing themselves and the organization they represent. Obviously, this should be done in a manner that inspires some degree of confidence and interest on the part of the gatekeeper. Initial trust comes from a combination of the organizer’s personal style of speech, dress, eye contact, and presentation along with her or his ability to introduce the new GCO in the most favorable and legitimate light.

Outsiders should look and act in a manner consistent with community custom and must put personal idiosyncrasies aside. Questions often arise about why an organizer for a “progressive” community organization that’s working for a free and open society should have to compromise on personal lifestyle. The answer lies in the fact that social change must come through collective action and organizers must be accepted initially by community members on their own terms in order for effective communication
to take place. Outside organizers will have enough problems as it is with new ideas about collective action that may arouse suspicion.

But a good appearance and style won’t be enough to establish initial trust in most cases. The outside organizer also must portray the organization he or she represents in a positive way. In some instances, a well-known GCO may carry strong credentials of its own, either positive or negative, that affect the organizing process. For instance, the organizer might be working for ACORN, National People’s Action, or Neighbor To Neighbor. In other cases, an outside organizer will be starting fresh, with no real track record. In all situations, it is important to build on whatever legitimization the GCO already has. Therefore, support from other gatekeepers and organizations (churches, unions, agencies, and/or social groups) should be mentioned prominently during the introduction.

Finally, the outside organizer should carry tangible evidence of the GCO in the form of membership buttons, descriptive flyers or brochures, letters of endorsement, and favorable newspaper clippings, if they exist. As in any other introductory situation, the organizer and the organization are attempting to put their collective “best foot forward.” Hopefully, the initial trust and interest generated by this effort will allow the outsider to move forward with the meeting.

Discovery. It is difficult to appeal to a person’s self-interest without understanding “what makes that person tick.” Now it’s the outside organizer’s turn to find out from the gatekeeper, “Who are you, what do you know about the community, and where does your self-interest lie?” I call this process “discovery,” and I learn the right answers by asking the right questions.

Asking questions like an organizer is an acquired art that is difficult to describe. Whenever I’m working as an outside organizer, I usually begin by seeking some basic information about the neighborhood (often I already know some of the answers) and how the gatekeeper sees things. Sometimes I’m looking for hard data and substantial answers, while other times I’m looking for subtle “keys” to the gatekeeper’s attitudes and self-interests. As previously mentioned, I often save the “heaviest” gatekeepers until last so that I go into the meeting with some existing support, momentum, more sophisticated questions, and a good feel for the issues and dynamics of the neighborhood.

There is no prepackaged list of questions that I ask. Specific responses trigger different follow-ups and new directions as I ad-lib off the conversational flow. But typical initial questions might include, How long have you lived/worked here? What do you see as the major problems in the neighborhood? What’s the best way to solve them? Are there any groups or individuals working on these problems now? Who are the key grassroots leaders in the community? What are the various elected officials doing for the neighborhood? What about existing institutions and social service
agencies? What’s your agency/institution/group doing, and what’s your role in it? Is there a need for a new organization to help people get more power and control over everyday problems?

There is a complex process at work during this part of the meeting, where I’m doing a little flattering, learning new information, “psyching out” the person, and subtly testing some issue themes. While I’m asking my questions, the gatekeeper may be asking some of her or his own. But in reality, I almost totally control the content of the conversation with my friendly but rapid-fire questions. By the end of this discovery process, I know considerably more about the gatekeeper than he or she knows about me or my GCO. I’ve kept my cards close to the vest and almost completely read the gatekeeper’s hand. I’ve answered honestly and openly, but dropped my own poker face only at strategic moments.

The Vision. At this point it is logical for the gatekeeper to begin wondering, “What’s this organizer’s angle and what’s in it for me?” Having discovered much about this person, I’m now prepared to lay out an organizational vision attuned to the gatekeeper’s self-interest. Building on my knowledge of the neighborhood and its problems, as well as the attitudes of the gatekeeper, I describe some of the things that a new organization could accomplish, using real precedents wherever possible. While the vision may vary from person to person in style and content, it is always honest and always leads to the inescapable fact that an organization must be built.

At this early stage in the organizing drive, there is no way for the outside organizer to promise action on a particular problem or issue, since those decisions will be made by a currently nonexistent membership and leadership. Before any decisions can be made or problems solved, a GCO must be created. The vision is designed to grab the gatekeeper’s attention because of its potential solution to problems and issues, but it also should move her or him to the conclusion that building a new organization is a necessary precondition.

The Commitment. Having offered the vision as bait, I am ready to set my organizational hook and reel in a commitment. It is time to ask the gatekeeper, “What will you do for the organization?” In this case, I want a list of contacts whom I can approach, using the gatekeeper’s name. Secondly, I may want meeting space, a letter of endorsement, or some general publicity. I always ask for the major favor first. If I allow the gatekeeper to grant me a minor favor first, I’ve let her or him “off the hook.” I call this the “Big Favor First Principle” and have found it to be true in most areas of human interaction. If there’s a negative answer to the major request, I can always work my way down the ladder of priorities, combining a request for a lesser commitment with the person’s “guilt” over having denied the major favor. But my leverage for securing the maximum commitment is greater when nothing else has been granted.
Proper timing is always key when seeking a commitment, not unlike a salesperson’s sense of “when to pop the question.” I move to the commitment at a point where I feel the gatekeeper’s interest and excitement have peaked. I attempt to establish a “yes psychology” by avoiding questions that might produce a “no” answer and getting agreement on several easy statements such as, “It sure sounds like we need a strong organization around here” or “I know you’re concerned about the neighborhood and its problems—that’s why I contacted you.” Then, looking the person directly in the eye, smiling, and nodding my head slightly, I say something like, “We need your help in getting started!” and ask for the names of people in the neighborhood who might be interested in such an organization. Having gotten as many names as possible, I then seek permission to use the gatekeeper’s name and ask for secondary commitments.

The description above may give the reader the impression that organizing is a rather cold and calculating business. It isn’t cold, but it is calculated. Outside organizers have to think strategically and must use all the psychological “tricks” at their disposal if they hope to overcome the inevitable suspicion and distrust they will encounter. To do anything less is to set the stage for failure. Having talked to five or more gatekeepers, I should have a list of 15–20 contacts. Now I’m ready to begin building an Organizing Committee.

**Opinion Leaders.** All communities are made up of a large number of formal and informal groups ranging from block clubs, church organizations, and social clubs to friendship and kinship networks. The members of these groups each have varying degrees of influence and power over their peers. The individuals with the most influence, hereafter referred to as opinion leaders, usually have the power to give the organizer a “license to operate” within their group. This is accomplished when the opinion leaders give their trust and support to the organizer, thereby legitimizing the organizing effort. By gaining the support of key opinion leaders, the organizer maximizes the possibility of being accepted by other group members, because these leaders have the most ability to introduce new people and ideas. An introduction by a less influential group member gives the organizer less initial credibility and risks incurring the anger and jealousy of some key people, who may feel slighted.

Of course, it’s possible to gain legitimacy by talking with a significant portion of a group’s members, whose collective influence may exceed that of any one opinion leader. Indeed, organizers attempting to help people create a democratic, broad-based organization must be careful to avoid dealing with a few people on an elitist basis, thereby creating a bad organizational precedent. There must be a balance between the need to search out people who have the respect and trust of their neighbors and the need to prevent a concentration of power in the hands of a few people.
Furthermore, any social group is a dynamic rather than static entity. The power of various individuals within each group ebbs and flows; a person may have a great deal of influence in social matters, but little power to alter political opinions. Local opinion leaders may be very important with one faction of a social group and less powerful with another faction. At times, different groups will overlap one another, and the same individual will hold differing status in the various groups in which he or she is a member.

Similarly, a license to operate from one neighborhood group does not insure legitimization in any other neighborhood group. In fact, gaining the support of one group actually may alienate the organizer from other rival groups. Often, organizers will need to choose which of several conflicting groups are most important for the organization-building process. Legitimacy will never be gained with all, or perhaps even a majority, of the formal and informal neighborhood groups, but the organizer seeks the “critical mass” that will enable the work to move forward effectively.

The insider organizer already has solid contacts with many opinion leaders (and perhaps a few negative relationships), so after moving quickly through gatekeepers—or skipping them altogether—he or she also can move much more rapidly than outsiders through the process of dealing with opinion leaders. For instance, organizers must differentiate between real opinion leaders and grasstips leaders. Often grasstips leaders develop the ability to move easily in the institutional world as official representatives of their communities. They even may have some capacity to deliver on small favors for their “constituents” much in the same manner as politicians in a political machine. But, while these grasstips leaders tend to occupy visible token positions in establishment groups, they are not respected in their own communities and have no base of followers. Since they often are neither responsive nor responsible to neighborhood people, grasstips leaders seldom have the ability to grant the organizer a real license to operate.

Two other phenomena should be noted. First, well-established organizations, such as ACORN, often generate invitations from neighborhood residents interested in establishing a new organization. While such invitations generally are a distinct advantage and present possibilities for initial legitimacy, the organizer must determine how broad-based and representative the group doing the inviting is. There is an obvious danger in working exclusively with a narrow segment of the population, and the organizer must make sure that other parts of the community are involved in the organizing process.

Secondly, sometimes there will not be an adequate number of contacts for either insiders or outsiders. Then some “cold doorknocking” will be necessary. Often, this work can be done in areas that appear to have potentially hot organizing issues, such as abandoned houses, vacant lots, or bad traffic intersections. The major drawback to approaching someone
cold is that the organizer lacks legitimization from relevant gatekeepers and opinion leaders. However, if the issue is compelling and the individual isn’t part of another community group (whose members could feel threatened and hostile toward a new GCO), these problems can be overcome. The organizer often can find new opinion leaders by asking the “cold visitee” to name other “good people to see.” The people whose names are mentioned most frequently may turn out to be key opinion leaders.

Another approach to finding initial leadership is to engage in relatively innocuous doorknocking activities such as voter registration or petitioning for noncontroversial programs. This variation has the advantage of allowing the organizer to thoroughly test the waters before embarking on an organizing drive. The disadvantage is that it’s time consuming. A compromise might be to do a general telephone survey that could be used to identify individuals interested in building a new organization. Follow-up visits then could be made.

Ideally, an Organizing Committee will consist of 12–15 members. But, obviously, we are not looking for the first 12–15 people who express some interest in a new GCO. We are looking for people with leadership potential, people who are, to some degree, opinion leaders within a community. Yet we also must find people able to develop a primary loyalty to a new organization, rather than those who wish to remain “big frogs” in their small-group ponds. In order to find 12–15 such people, the organizer should visit at least 30–40 “warm contacts” or make 70–80 “cold visits.” While it is certainly possible to find enough people for the Organizing Committee by making fewer contacts, the quality of the committee will suffer accordingly.

I believe in going slowly in the early stages of organizing in order to build the strong initial leadership foundation upon which the new organization must stand. Provided that I have at least ten people, I am more concerned about the quality than the quantity of people on the organizing committee. Large numbers will be important at the chapter formation meeting, but good potential leadership is the priority during the early stages of organization. (I should also point out that much of the information contained in the section on Opinion Leaders also is applicable to the General Recruitment Drive as well. While identifying initial leadership and developing an Organizing Committee are essential, a central purpose of the drive is to move large numbers of rank-and-file members into the new organization. The reader should keep this in mind when examining this section on Opinion Leaders.)

**Getting in the Door.** It is time to begin making home visits—for insiders, directly to people they know, or for outsiders, to the contacts provided by gatekeepers. Again, the insider has a significant advantage and usually will not have to worry about getting in the door of people whom they already know. If I am an outsider, I usually go directly to the person’s house rather
than try to set up the appointment over the telephone. While bad experiences with door-to-door salespeople are common, and the phone may eliminate some of the feeling of high pressure that people often sense when someone suddenly appears at their door unannounced, the telephone is a relatively anonymous means of communication. It’s much easier for people to give excuses over the phone than face-to-face. Since this model covers a fairly concentrated geographic neighborhood, arguments favoring the telephone because of increased efficiency carry little weight. If my contact isn’t home, I simply walk up the street to another person on the list.

My goal is to get inside the person’s home where we can have a full conversation. It’s difficult to be effective if forced to stand outside and talk through a half-closed door. The person will be anxious to return to what he or she was doing before being interrupted. More important, the organizer who’s been invited into a person’s home has won a small but meaningful degree of trust. I always take the initiative—the key to getting in a door is to ask. By asking directly, I put the person in a situation where a quick decision must be made. Usually they will consent.

A simplified face-to-face conversation might begin like this:

Staples: Hello! Mr. Thomas?
Thomas: Yeah, What do you want?
Staples: My name is Lee Staples and I’m working in the neighborhood here. Father Flanagan over at St. Peter’s Church suggested that I talk with you.
Thomas: Father Flanagan sent you?
Staples: Right! I’ve been talking with a lot of families around here about the possibility of starting an organization to work on some of the neighborhood problems. Like that intersection up the street at Maple and Fifth. Father Flanagan says you’re concerned about your kid’s safety.
Thomas: Yeah, the cars speed through there like the Indy 500. I signed the petition for a light but it didn’t do any good. The city people say they don’t have the money.
Staples: Well, that’s exactly what I’d like to talk with you about. ‘Cause if enough people want to start an organization we can do something. If you’ve got a few minutes to sit down and talk, I’d like to get your ideas on this.
Thomas: Well . . . I guess I’ve got a few minutes. Who’d you say you work with?
Staples: Thanks! [Smiling and walking in, I then proceed to fully explain about the organization I am working with and complete the credentialing process.]
In this example, mentioning Father Flanagan’s name gave me a degree of legitimacy. I also offered my credentials, although somewhat vaguely, and immediately appealed to Mr. Thomas’s self-interest on the traffic issue. I jumped at the slight opening to come in, but using a smile and answering his question allowed me to avoid appearing too “pushy.”

**Finding Common Ground.** During the “discovery” phase, I attempt to find out how this person views the world, what kind of leadership potential he or she may have, and what he or she thinks are the most important issues. I also try to establish some common social ground, learning something about each person’s interests, how long they have lived there, where they work (if they do), the names of their children, pets, and hobbies, and accepting most offers of food and drink (although never hard liquor or drugs). During these conversations, I share some of the same information about myself, hopefully making a connection. The subjects will vary, but during all these communications I take copious mental notes, many of which I write down later on 3” × 5” index cards.

A typical visit will last 20–45 minutes, and during this time I quickly must sensitize myself to how the person sees the world. Not surprisingly, this will differ greatly from person to person. A young Latina woman renting a rundown apartment for the past six months lives in a different world from an elderly black man who has owned a little house next door for thirty-five years, even though both may be considered low-income community residents. The organizer must appeal to the self-interests of each person and synthesize an organizational vision consistent with multiple worldviews or “realities.”

The first step is to understand how different social groups perceive and define reality. Appeals to people’s self-interest, engagement in conversation about the neighborhood, humor, and the ability to arouse curiosity often enable an organizer to adjust to the multiple subjective realities of neighborhood groups. Through constant questioning during the discovery process, the organizer can distinguish between individual traits and those that are shared, a key factor in identifying collective concerns and potential organizing issues. *I am attempting to find personal problems that can be aggregated into political issues.*

Essentially, outsider organizers must learn to think like community members. For any outsider, this process is similar to learning a different language and reaching the point when they suddenly begin to think in the new language, without having to make a mental translation back to their native tongue. In fact, learning a language and learning a culture are interdependent. Reality is created and maintained by language, but the same words may have very different meanings in two different realities. Insiders will need to be aware of how different subgroups define social reality. For example, if I remark to a welfare recipient that “the welfare system is a mess,” the recipient probably will agree, thinking that I mean there is “too
little money for people to live decently.” On the other hand, the same remark to a low-income worker may be interpreted to mean that “too many ‘freeloaders’ are getting on welfare.”

Apart from differences in meaning caused by multiple realities, many words are losing all semblance of common significance. Words such as democracy, freedom, empowerment, participation, and community control have been corrupted beyond recognition, most often by politicians and advertisers. Organizers who talk about such abstract concepts must give concrete illustrations and use vivid images to help create a new set of significant symbols that will be shared by the organization’s members.

But before such a new reality can be constructed, there must be what Haggstrom (1971) has called a process of “reality softening,” whereby certain collective assumptions are called into question. During doorknocking, people often remark that their particular neighborhood is uniquely unorganizable. I always challenge this opinion by citing examples of successful organizations that people have built in other “unorganizable” neighborhoods. Clichés such as “You can’t fight city hall” are countered in the same way.

I also try to assess the person’s leadership potential during the discovery phase of the visit. I particularly look for characteristics such as energy, enthusiasm, anger at injustice, critical consciousness, political instincts, self-confidence, sense of humor, ability to deal with conflicts, and democratic tendencies. I look for people who have some natural following, yet do not have strong primary loyalty to any other organization. Negative characteristics include racism, sexism, homophobia, prejudice against welfare recipients or other minority segments of the neighborhood, extreme allegiance to particular elected officials, ideological dogma, lack of time, timidity, unpopularity, and general “flakiness.”

**Finding Issues.** Finally, I am constantly searching for possible organizing issues. Just as a hungry person can glance at a page of a newspaper or magazine and immediately focus on all the “food” words, the organizer can pick potential issues from seemingly random bits of conversation. Of course, the conversation should not be random, as the organizer steers it by asking a series of questions probing for issues among the various social problems in the neighborhood.

What is an issue, and what differentiates it from a problem? A problem is a difficult situation or circumstance, an open-ended question with no particular resolution, such as lack of affordable housing, high crime rates, poor schools, or inadequate health care. Issues are proposed solutions to problems, which often may be controversial. They may entail disagreement and dispute over social action to remedy some aspect of the problem, such as the need for rent control, a police foot patrol, parent learning centers, or universal health care. But they also might be addressed through community development—developing new units of low-cost housing, a
crime watch, a volunteer tutorial program, or a community health fair. While the organizer should not choose the issues, he or she does play an active role in helping people transform seemingly unsolvable general problems into specific, actionable issues.

What makes a good organizing issue? Good issues build organization by attracting participants. They must appeal intensely to the self-interest of a significant number of people, and in order to do so, they need to meet several criteria. Perhaps the best test of a self-interest issue was established by Saul Alinsky (1969), who argued that the issue must be immediate enough for people to care deeply, specific enough for them to grasp, and winnable or realistic enough for them to take the time to get involved. To the extent that an issue can meet these criteria, it will have a strong self-interest draw with the potential to attract large numbers of people.

Clearly, the people getting organized will be the best judge of what is most immediate to their lives. Sometimes these problems may seem insignificant to the organizer, who secretly might wish to focus on more “substantial” issues. But control over the issues is essential if the members are to feel that they direct their own organization; and, besides, people will not participate on issues that they do not identify as immediate to their own lives. Organizers should not impose their pet issues on community members and should concentrate on helping to identify those conditions and problems that arouse the most salient interest. Then, he or she can play an active role in carving out an actionable issue.

There is an almost direct correlation between the level of interest and the level of discontent surrounding a particular problem. The organizer doesn’t simply assess dissatisfaction in a neutral fashion but maximizes existing indignation by asking agitational questions that “rub raw the sores of discontent.” The organizer can’t create dissatisfaction where it doesn’t exist and shouldn’t try to do so, yet he or she can help bring complaints to the surface as part of the discovery process.

Long ago, Lyle Schaller (1972) identified four of the mainsprings of discontent that organizers can use in searching for possible issues. The first is “response to what is perceived as a bad decision.” Thus, an organizer who learns that a fire station will be closed for budgetary reasons will raise questions about how people interpret the decision. Usually an unpopular proposal will generate as much unhappiness as a final decision. Plans for a new highway through the neighborhood, an increase in utility rates, or a decrease in summer youth jobs all would be fertile ground for dissatisfaction. The organizer can heighten the sense of injustice by asking such comparative questions as, “Would other, wealthier neighborhoods be treated so shabbily by the powers that be?”

Discontent also emerges through the vision and model concept. By emphasizing what can be accomplished, reinforced with successful examples and precedents, the organizer can stimulate discontent by raising expec-
tations that solutions can be found. For instance, a vacant lot may be covered with abandoned cars, old bed springs, broken glass, and a mix of other debris. People from outside the neighborhood may be dumping trash there illegally. The organizer could begin by asking residents how they would like to see the property used. Is a playground needed? Do folks want a community garden? Should it just be a quiet park? The organizer should describe basic options leading to the desired outcome, such as a community cleanup (community development) or a social action campaign pressuring the owner or the city. News clippings, photographs, organizational newsletters, and vignettes could illustrate how other groups successfully resolved similar issues.

Schaller also points to “the self-identified discrepancy” when the individual sees “the difference between the ideal and reality” (1972). The organizer constantly searches for contradictions between the public and private behavior of various decision-makers. Thus, the “All-American City” with its crumbling neighborhoods, the “People’s Bank” that is guilty of disinvestment, and the civic leader who owns substandard rental housing all are vulnerable when illusions are stripped away. Slogans and advertising lines such as “No Child Left Behind” or “The Company that Cares about You” can be taken at face value to raise questions about public officials, businesses, and government bodies. In short, the organizer helps expose discrepancies or contradictions and agitates to raise the level of dissatisfaction.

Finally, discontent grows where there is a “malfunction” in a basic social institution. For example, delays in the hospital emergency room, ineffective jobs programs, poor police response time, or the welfare department’s inability to process new applications efficiently all are potential issue areas. Generally, people’s complaints are not far below the surface in such cases. The “sores of discontent” already are festering. It doesn’t take much to make them raw. The key is to begin raising options for successful group action to resolve these problems. At a later point, an existing GCO may foster discontent by overloading institutions or organizations that may be performing poorly, such as adult literacy programs, neighborhood health services, after-school tutorials, employment training, or housing assistance. But at this point in time, dissatisfaction arises totally naturally.

Throughout this process, the organizer doesn’t “preach” at people, but rather lets them draw their own conclusions—albeit in response to agitational questions. Where dissatisfaction does not exist, organizers should attempt to find out why and then either change their approach on the subject or move on to test a different problem. Often, community members may attempt to mask their true emotions when talking with outsider organizers that are relative strangers. But as people become angrier, their real feelings usually pour forth. Nothing should be forced. By talking with
(rather than at) people and *listening* carefully to them, both insider and outsider organizers begin establishing the necessary climate of mutual trust and self-respect. *Good listening skills are essential for effective organizing.*

Having determined the immediacy of a problem, the organizer works with people to sharpen the lines that will define *specific*, actionable issues. Organizing issues are “cut” from social problems much as a piece of pie is cut from the whole. Problems such as housing, crime, and the environment are overwhelming for any GCO to tackle; it is essential to break them down into specific community development or social action issues—the creation of fifty units of affordable housing or a campaign to force absentee landlords to abide by the state sanitary code, a community crime watch or increased police foot patrols, or an environmental awareness education program or a campaign targeting corporate polluters. The goals and objectives need to be at a level that is manageable for organizational action. If this is not done, recruitment will prove difficult; most people prefer action that is specific, rather than generalized talk.

Organizers help people move from problems to issues by offering specific, actionable proposals. For instance, if community members complain that city hall has written off the neighborhood and no longer provides needed services, the organizer tosses out ideas for possible action. Is a traffic light needed at the intersection of Hope and Pray Streets? What about getting the city to reopen the closed swimming pool in Parched Earth Park? Should new sidewalks be constructed along Hazard Boulevard? Are more streetlights needed on Ominous Avenue? As people respond to these specific options, issues begin to take shape.

Just as there are many ways to slice a pie, there also are numerous ways to cut an issue. For example, the housing problem can spawn issue campaigns as diverse as rent control, low-income home improvement loans, developing new units, inclusionary zoning, boarding up abandoned houses, homesteading, lead paint removal, code enforcement, or passing a condominium conversion ordinance. Obviously, community members will choose to cut issues in ways that meet their own self-interests, and the proposals will vary as the organizer moves among different people. The organizer should make it clear, however, that the decision to work on specific issues will be made democratically (at this stage either by the Organizing Committee, when it begins to meet, or by the general membership, once the organization is formed).

Actionable issues are essential, but alone they will not ensure organizational success or widespread participation. In order to overcome the sense of hopelessness and apathy that often pervades low-to moderate-income communities, issues must be *framed* so that community members are convinced that a concrete victory is *winnable*, that it is realistic enough for them to make a commitment to get involved. *Framing* entails clearly defining or cutting the issue, explaining who is responsible, and suggesting
potential solutions (C. Ryan, 1991). A good issue frame leads to a plausible pathway to success—the swimming pool shouldn’t be closed, the mayor is responsible, and we will bring pressure to bear on the mayor during this upcoming “election year.” This very credible scenario enables people to develop a vision for change. That vision must be exciting and compelling. It must give rise to a new sense of hope and urgency. It must move people.

**Building Momentum.** At this point, organizers must become more aggressive, more positive, and more energized. People have to be motivated and “fired up” to join in collective action with other community members. Organizers frequently will meet resistance and skepticism. Negative thinking (“People around here just don’t care,” or “What good does it do to organize? City hall only will ignore us”) must be challenged. Despair and pessimism must be replaced by hope and enthusiasm. Any organizer should firmly believe that the next person talked with will be ready to join. A sense of optimism and excitement must be conveyed. This takes intensity and drive. The organizing effort should be like a rolling train, gathering force and momentum as more people hop onboard.

The organizer must convince community members that concrete victories can be achieved through collective action, that the vision is possible. Success will turn primarily on two factors—the actual content of the pitch or “rap,” and the effectiveness of the organizer’s delivery. Of the two, the delivery probably is most important. Having established an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, the organizer must communicate in a clear, succinct, direct, and compelling manner. Language should be crisp and vivid; abstract concepts should be concretized through clear examples. The organizer should avoid pedantic, cumbersome language, like that typically found in academia.

The rap needs to be fueled by genuine sincerity that springs from the organizer’s anger and outrage over the conditions and problems faced by community members. It must be energized by an honest belief in the efficacy of collective social action. Organizers will not be effective until and unless they fully embrace the grassroots community-organizing approach that they have undertaken. This is no time for skeptics or cynics, for the faint of heart or those who just can’t start. The excitement and enthusiasm of a sincere organizer are contagious, and people will respond accordingly. The organizer uses a combination of agitation, self-interest, humor, inspiration, and positive examples to motivate people, and refuses to accept negative opinions about the inability of community members to organize successfully.

But faith alone will not produce victories. The actual content of the vision emphasizes the power of—and need for—a GCO as the vehicle to produce social change. The idea is to convince people that only a strong community organization will have the clout to resolve the immediate, specific issues that have been cut and framed. The organizer cites examples of
successful action taken by other GCOs in comparable circumstances. The more similar the example (in geographic and time proximity, type of constituency, and kind of issue), the stronger the impact.

Where examples and precedents do not exist, hypothetical “What if?” questions can be asked. For instance, in a situation where residents want to take social action to force the cleanup of a vacant lot filled with junk and debris, the organizer might ask, “What would happen if everybody got together and asked the owner to come out to a meeting right here in the neighborhood?” He or she could embellish the question by raising possible action options, such as taking the owner on a tour of the property, inviting the media, and presenting a series of specific demands. In response to the inevitable question of what could be done if the owner refused to show up, the organizer might ask, “What would happen if we went to the owner’s business office with lots of angry people and small children carrying signs?” Further possibilities for escalation could be raised: “What would happen if lots of people got together, threw a bunch of the junk in a truck, drove out to the owner’s house in the suburbs, and dumped it on the front lawn?”

While not telling people what to do, the organizer asks questions that suggest possible strategies and tactics for action. A range of options is given. In the process, the vision of successful resolution of the issue becomes clearer. People begin to see that this specific issue that is so immediate to their lives is indeed winnable through collective action. The organizer stresses that the formation of a powerful GCO is a necessary precondition to resolving the issues. The reason why problems haven’t been dealt with before is that community members haven’t been organized. Only by creating a powerful broad-based democratic organization will people be able to win concrete victories.

While taking a more aggressive role in laying out the organizational vision, I still want people to arrive at their own conclusions rather than overwhelming them with a slick rap. Naturally, the vision varies slightly from person to person; the two-way conversation and multiple worldviews I encounter insure this. As the organizing drive progresses, I am able to build on the knowledge and information already gathered to develop a more precise and sophisticated organizing pitch. The pace often is uneven during these visits. The credentialing, discovery, and vision phases are not neatly separated but instead are interwoven throughout the entire time. Eventually, however, I move to seek some sort of commitment.

At this stage in the organizing drive, the commitment that is sought will vary. The people with the greatest leadership potential and interest will be encouraged to help form the Organizing Committee; most of the others will be urged to join the organization and attend the chapter formation meeting. The organizer has a tremendous amount of power and control at this point. Subjective decisions are made regarding leadership potential, and there is always the danger of abuse of these responsibilities.
Nevertheless, the organizer must attempt to pull together the most effective Organizing Committee possible. Once established, that OC will play a major and critical role in the remainder of the organizing process. Therefore, the quality of this initial leadership group may very well determine the ultimate success of the fragile new GCO. Never again will the organizer exercise as much influence as during these initial stages before the organization actually exists. This power must be transferred to the emerging leadership as soon as possible. And the better the leadership, the more effective and efficient this process will be.

Therefore, only the top prospects are recruited for the Organizing Committee. In order to have a good record of everyone visited, I keep 3” × 5” index cards with each person’s name, address, phone numbers, occupation, issues, further contacts given to me, and other relevant information. Frequently, I’ll go back to a contact at a later time to seek a commitment to join the OC. This delay allows me the opportunity to draw from a larger pool of people and gives the person contacted time to fully assess the emerging organization. Often, some of the best potential leaders may hang back in the early stages until the GCO “proves itself.” In a typical drive, I might recruit 18–20 people for the Organizing Committee from a total of fifty contacts.

The final OC (12–15 probably will participate on a regular basis) should have a mix of people by race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and physical and mental disability roughly proportional to the overall population of the community that is organizing. While some turnover can be expected from meeting to meeting, at least half of this group should form a solid, emerging leadership core. They need to have the interest, time, and energy to involve themselves actively in the remainder of the organizing drive. As they begin to develop a group identity, organizational loyalty and ownership will evolve, and thereafter the organizing effort will have true legitimacy within the community.

**General Recruitment Drive**

The next phase of the organizing process is an intensive effort to recruit community members to join the emerging GCO. The Organizing Committee directs and coordinates this process while working alongside the organizer to sign up new activists. The first meeting of the OC kicks off the General Recruitment Drive.

**Organizing Committee Meeting.** At this meeting, the initial leadership group comes together to make the plan for building the new GCO. The date and time of this meeting should be chosen with care to insure that key people can attend. Ideally the meeting will be held in one of the member’s homes, with a clear understanding that subsequent meetings will be rotated. This directly involves the people doing the hosting in the recruitment
process and increases their sense of ownership. It also helps prevent conflict and attacks that are more likely to occur in public places—especially if other organizations are competing for turf. Since the group will have no history or elected leadership, the organizer chairs this first meeting. A typical agenda would include:

- Introductions
- Discussion of Issues
- Decision to Organize
- Dues Collection
- Recruitment Plan and Timetable
- Time, Place, and Chair for Next OC Meeting

When issues are discussed, I frequently like to use a short slide show with color pictures of various neighborhood problems already identified during the home visits. The pictures of specific conditions such as abandoned houses, dangerous intersections, vacant lots, or poor school facilities usually spark a lively discussion. In cases where other chapters of the GCO exist, slides depicting the successful resolution of similar issues can be mixed in to illustrate the efficacy of organizing. As the song goes, “Every picture tells a story.” Thus, both the issues and the organizational vision can be concretized. A slide show also is an excellent vehicle for relating an organization’s history or explaining citywide, state, or national issue campaigns. During these discussions, the OC members begin a process of cutting, framing, and prioritizing issues that continues right up to the chapter formation meeting. The organizer facilitates this examination by asking agitational questions, exploring possible courses of action, and testing the group’s responses. During this and subsequent meetings, some issues may be added while others are dropped.

The dialogue about the issues inevitably should lead to a discussion about the need to organize. If the initial work with OC members has been done properly, everyone in the meeting already will be predisposed in favor of organizing, but the group discussion collectively reaffirms each personal decision. An actual vote to organize may be taken, or the group simply can reach a clear consensus. The formal decision to organize is in no way superfluous. This action by respected community members constitutes an official sanction to build a new GCO. In some instances, these OC members will be called on to defend against attacks by assorted opponents and detractors, including politicians and “grassroots” leaders who feel threatened by a new organization that challenges traditional power relationships. Collectively formalizing the decision to organize gives the OC members a greater sense of group identity and cohesion. The whole organizing effort begins to become theirs, as they take responsibility for decisions and processes.
The importance of organizational ownership by an emerging leadership group far transcends defensive purposes. The exercise of power and control by the membership is a goal in itself for grassroots democracy. Prior to the formation of the Organizing Committee, no structure exists to make decisions.* The organizer, who up to this point has controlled all key decisions, now is able to begin transferring decision-making power to OC members.

At this time, organizers also are able to initiate the process of explaining and clarifying their roles. Questions often arise over “who’s supposed to do what.” The discussion about whether to organize provides a logical opportunity for organizers to begin answering questions about role relationships. They can explain that the role does not entail making final decisions on issues, strategies, tactics, or organizational policy. Rather it is the organizer’s job to help build and develop the organization to its greatest potential. This often entails facilitating discussions, teaching new skills, helping develop analytic abilities, giving strategic and tactical training or advice, acting to preserve democratic processes, and generally functioning as an organizational resource.

The topic only can be introduced at this point. As the organizing process continues, countless opportunities will be available for further role structuring and defining. I find myself constantly reminding people, “It’s your organization,” and answering questions about my opinion with the question, “What do you think?” As an organizational history develops, roles will become clearer and expectations more predictable. Once the consensus to form an organization has been reached, it makes sense to collect dues from those who haven’t already joined. The Organizing Committee will be highly visible in the weeks ahead, and it is imperative that all members demonstrate their full commitment by paying the dues. Prior to this first OC meeting, I always talk individually with the invitees about the importance of dues and make sure that they have already joined or are prepared to do so. The dues collection at the meeting also provides an opportunity for a wider discussion about the importance of internal funding and membership control of finances. It is critical to deal with questions about why there are dues and where the money goes.

Discussions of a recruitment plan often produce suggestions about the need to “get ourselves on radio and TV” or “in the newspapers.” This type of general publicity never has and never will build solid community or-

*Some models—especially the O of O approach—use a “Sponsoring Committee” to fulfill this function. Sponsoring Committees usually consist of visible, influential people such as the clergy, representatives from labor, civic leaders, or social service agency representatives. Their purpose is raising funds, providing initial legitimization, and at times hiring organizers and overseeing their work until a new GCO is established. If the organizational constituency is drawn from institutions, such people may in fact become leaders. But if they are not from the group doing the organizing, it is not appropriate for them to make basic organizational policy.
ganization. The most effective means of organizing involves face-to-face contact with everyone in the community through a systematic recruitment drive. General publicity can be used to supplement and reinforce face-to-face contact, but it is no substitute.

When building a turf organization, it makes sense to do recruitment by knocking on every door in the area. This approach also may be the most useful for issue or identity organizing when a high percentage of potential GCO members live in a concentrated area. If community members are more dispersed, it is more efficient to make targeted home visits working from a list of possible members. But in either case, direct contact is made by knocking on a person’s door. The most effective doorknocking is done when organizers (especially outsiders) team up with individual OC members (although two males may not be a viable option in many communities). Therefore, during the OC meeting, I seek commitments to help doorknock, setting specific dates and times while enthusiasm is highest. One technique is to pass around a calendar with doorknocking slots filled in ahead of time by some of the members. This helps build the expectation that everyone should sign up.

As part of the recruitment plan, the OC usually drafts a letter to inform neighborhood residents that an organizing drive is taking place. The letter mentions some of the specific issues the new GCO hopes to address, briefly explains a little about how the group will work, and notes that door-to-door recruitment will take place. Residents are urged to join and attend the founding meeting. The names and sometimes the addresses of the Committee members are typed at the bottom along with several contact phone numbers (see Appendix). It is important to deliver the letters right before doorknocking or home visits, since it helps allay questions and concerns that community members may have when someone comes around knocking on their door. The letter either can be mailed or dropped at the appropriate dwellings. Mailing often makes most sense when home visits will be made, unless OC members are able to personally distribute the letters. In turf organizing where every door will be visited, it is far cheaper, quicker, and more efficient to hand deliver.

The OC also should choose a name for the new GCO at its first meeting. This will be used on all leaflets, letters, and posters that are used to publicize the chapter-formation meeting. A time and place for that first meeting should be set, with several people taking responsibility for getting permission to use the site—frequently a church, school, library, settlement house, social service agency, union hall, or social club. The site needs to be familiar, easily accessible, and “neutral” enough so that all segments of the community feel comfortable going there. Great care also should be taken to choose a day and time that’s convenient for most community members and doesn’t conflict with any other major meetings or events.
Decisions will need to be made about providing food, refreshment, and childcare. Finally, a time, place, and temporary chair for the next OC meeting are chosen. Meetings usually are held every other week, although some organizing models call for weekly meetings. It is best to rotate the chair and location for these early meetings rather than build any entrenched leadership at such an early stage. Institutional sites that are closely identified with particular neighborhood factions should be avoided if possible or rotated at the least.

**Doorknocking.** Following the first meeting and circulation of the letter, doorknocking begins immediately. Experience has shown that about a six-week period is the optimum time frame for this phase of the drive. Of course, the actual amount of time required will be a function of the total amount of doorknocking hours available, the time efficiency rate at which people are contacted, and the number of people targeted for recruitment. If OC members are not available, the organizers will have to go alone in order to hit all the doors. Generally, there is a tendency to overestimate the doorknocking hours available and the contact efficiency rate. Remember, it takes time to move between houses, and many people will not be home the first time you visit. Four to five conversations per hour will be a good rate when going door-to-door, and only three when making home visits.

When doorknocking, staff and leadership should wear organizational buttons (make them, if they don’t exist) and carry any existing credentialing materials, including copies of the letter, written endorsements from clergy, reprints of any favorable news stories, and a leaflet announcing the chapter-formation meeting (time, the day as well as the date, place, and hot issues identified by the Organizing Committee). Picture IDs also will be invaluable in communities where doorknocking may arouse suspicion and fear. It’s important that doorknockers carry membership cards and a clipboard with a sign-up sheet attached.

Time efficiency is crucial, so the average visit won’t last much longer than ten minutes. Still, it’s important to get inside the door. The organizing letter may be used in the credentialing process, but it is a serious mistake to hand someone anything lengthy to read before getting inside. Otherwise, they wind up reading while the doorknockers watch, shuffle their feet, and wait. That disrupts the doorknocker’s timing, overemphasizes written materials to the detriment of the spoken word, and delays the request to enter the house. Once inside, there is adequate time for people to examine written materials.

In addition to the kind of credentialing used in the initial doorknocking, I lead with some issues hoping to get an immediate self-interest response. In fact, the right issue and a sense of momentum on it will get you in more doors than leading with credentials. This is a typical approach:
Knock, Knock, Knock.

Resident: Yeah?
Staples: Hi—I’m Lee Staples, working with [name of GCO] here in the neighborhood. You’ve probably heard of us. [Smiling and nodding affirmatively I briefly wave the letter.] You probably got this letter from us last week. We’re the group that’s getting organized to do something about these high utility bills and problems like that abandoned house around the corner on Maple Street. [Pause.]
Resident: Really?
Staples: Yeah—there’s lots of people who want to see something done about that house. Would you like to see it boarded up or torn down?
Resident: Well, sure—who wouldn’t?
Staples: Right—well, if you’ve got a few minutes I’d like to come in and let you know what’s happening. I’ll bet you’ve got some good ideas.
Resident: O.K. Come on in.

Upon entering the house and taking a seat, I engage the person some more on the issue, gradually weaving in some of the organization’s credentials. Since there is no longer the luxury of extended visits, I usually refuse offers of food and drink. Time is too short to allow for the long discovery process used during the earlier stages of the drive; now the vision and the commitment assume the most importance. If solid work has been done during the earlier phases of the drive, the doorknockers will be able to identify the person’s self-interest quickly and accurately.

Thus, doorknockers ask questions about possible issues during the shortened discovery phase. Usually these questions are asked in a subtly agitational manner, with the recruiters making an educated guess as to which issues will be most relevant. Upon getting a good response on an issue, they lay out a vision pointing to successful resolution of the problem through organizational action. Again, precedents are cited whenever possible and the language should be simple, direct, and precise.

For example, after entering the above home, I might continue:

Staples: Isn’t there a school bus stop right in front of that house on Maple Street?
Resident: That’s right and I really worry about my little girl waiting there in the morning. The big kids hang out there and there’s all kinds of trouble.
Staples: Did you hear about the fire that was set in it last week?
Resident: I sure did! It’s just a matter of time before some kind of tragedy happens over there.
Staples: Well what do you think should be done? Mrs. Jones checked it out and found that the city owns it.

Resident: Hey, it’s got to be boarded up or torn down. Better yet, the city ought to sell it cheap to some family that’s willing to fix it up. You know there’s lots of people who need housing around here.

Staples: You know, that’s just what the ACORN group over near Codman Square did. They had an empty house just like this one, only it was right next door to a nursing home. A bunch of people from the neighborhood got together and went down to the city hall. They had signs and leaflets and even brought the TV cameras with them. They embarrassed the mayor and forced the city to sell the house real cheap under the Homesteading Program. Now there’s a family already moved in there and fixing it up.

Resident: Well, all right! That’s what we need around here! What’s this ACORN group, anyway?

With this kind of response, I would be well on my way to recruiting a new member. An explanation about ACORN and a dues pitch would follow. A commitment to attend the formation meeting would not be difficult. If the person showed leadership potential, I might stay a little bit longer but I also would have to keep moving at a fairly good pace. A note on the person’s card would remind me to do a follow-up visit after the big meeting. Perhaps he or she might take a leadership role on this issue at that time.

The doorknocker should be careful not to spend too much time with people who are obviously negative. The conversion rate is low, and even when successful, the recruiter spends an inordinate amount of valuable time convincing someone with questionable organizational instincts. While this may be good for the doorknocker’s ego, it is usually bad for the GCO. For instance, I have seen a number of cases where doorknockers for social action groups have minimized discussion about direct action and militancy with people expressing opposition to such tactics. While this approach succeeded in drawing these people to the meeting, once there, they were disruptive and counterproductive. Similar cases have occurred with people who exhibit strong racist tendencies, loyalists to other organizations, close supporters of various politicians, and an assortment of difficult personalities. While a GCO’s strength lies in its numbers, it is important to recruit community members who buy into the group’s basic philosophy and goals.

In short, the organization will not appeal to everyone, and not everyone will be helpful to the GCO. True, some of the best organizational people may be skeptical initially, and it may take time to convince them to get involved. Certainly, doorknockers must be careful not to offend people and
should take the time to neutralize hostility that can cause future organizational problems. But far less than a majority of people actually will join and participate actively. Ten percent is a good realistic goal, sufficient to give the GCO strength in the community. Doorknockers should concentrate on those who show the most interest in the issues and are excited about engaging in collective action with other community members. There may be exceptions, but in most instances when meeting negative people, it is best to cut the conversation short and minimize the time loss.

Doorknockers must be sensitive to individual differences. Varying the rap is essential; the set or “canned” approach should be left to mediocre door-to-door salespeople. Testing different raps during the initial steps of the drive significantly increases the odds of effective communication with different types of community members during the doorknocking phase. In short, the best recruiters simply use “different strokes for different folks,” varying their rhythm and timing with each person. These constant changes not only enhance the vision that is offered but also make the doorknocker’s job more interesting, challenging, and fun.

Just as important as the content of the rap is the manner in which the vision is delivered. It matters little what words recruiters use if they are not personally confident in their approach or cannot radiate warmth, enthusiasm, and sincerity. Giving an organizing rap isn’t merely an intellectual exercise or a case of remembering which words to use for certain types of people. Doorknockers must be able to generate excitement and arouse people’s emotions. They have to overcome skepticism and negative thinking, and know when to be low-key and when to be fiery. There is more art than science in a good organizing rap.

At this stage, two major commitments are sought during doorknocking—membership dues and attendance at the chapter-formation meeting. The recruiters hope to come away from the visit with the dues money in hand and the resident’s name on the sign-up sheet for the first meeting. Generally, collecting the full membership dues will be more difficult than getting a commitment to attend the first meeting. Remember the Big Favor First Principle. Since people might offer to pay at the initial meeting, it makes sense to attempt to get the dues money before signing them up.

Many inexperienced recruiters have difficulty asking low-income people to pay membership dues. In order to be effective, you first must fully understand and believe in the necessity of the dues money for ultimate organizational survival. A successful dues pitch cannot be defensive or apologetic, and recruiters must convey their sincere commitment to the principle of internal funding. Community members immediately will pick up on a tentative dues rap or a lack of self-confidence on the part of the doorknocker. Securing a dues commitment again involves building the conversation to a peak and developing a “yes psychology.” Effective eye contact should be maintained, and after getting agreement about the need to
build an organization and the person’s interest in getting involved, the recruiter simply and directly asks for the dues. Having eliminated two excuses already (no need and no interest), I usually toss out a familiar phrase such as “everybody knows you don’t get something for nothing” and launch into an explanation of what the dues money is used for and how the members run their own organization.

I diminish the amount by breaking it down to a weekly figure and then compare this small amount to other kinds of expenditures (cigarettes, beer, and fast food being my favorites). Thus, I am left saying something like “That’s only three dollars per week, less than a pack of cigarettes, less than a six pack or an order of chicken tenders. Now isn’t it worth a few pieces of greasy chicken a week to make this neighborhood a better place to live for yourself and your kids?” Obviously, other examples should be cited for nonsmokers, nondrinkers, and healthy eaters; the technique is to juxtapose the small amount of weekly dues with various small luxuries.

I make sure to hand the person a membership card and pen, saying something like “Now’s the time to do it.” If the person doesn’t have the cash, I ask for a check, and if there’s no money in the account, I suggest a postdated check. While this may sound heavy-handed to some, it really is not. We aren’t selling vacuum cleaners, and no one is coerced or tricked into joining. The doorknocker who is sincere and convinced about the potential for a new organization must transfer a sense of urgency to the person being recruited.

Of course, not everyone will pay the full dues during this first contact. Some want to wait to see the actual formation of the new organization. Doorknokers carry clipboards with sign-up sheets for those planning to attend the first meeting. Never start a sign-up sheet (or petition) with a blank page, since most people don’t like to go first. Members of the OC can fill in the first few lines on each sheet. Name, address, and phone number are recorded. The phone number is essential, because each person will be given a reminder phone call several days before the big meeting. Having the folks actually write this information on the sheet helps reinforce their commitment to attend. People are accustomed to writing their names on important documents such as checks, leases, and licenses, and writing their name on the sign-up sheet helps firm up their commitment. More than once, I have overheard one community member ask another if he or she planned to attend a meeting only to receive the reply, “I guess I better—I signed up to attend.”

Finally, a flyer for the meeting is left with each person, and in some instances further information or smaller commitments are sought. People may be asked to give a neighbor a ride or to talk to friends about joining. I frequently ask the names of other people on the street who may be interested, then when I come to that person’s door, I can refer back to this visit for legitimization.
**Housemeetings.** I also like to hold housemeetings in the early stages of the doorknocking drive as a supplementary recruitment device. Housemeetings simply are small meetings (5–15 people is a typical attendance) held either in someone’s home or in a neighborhood church, branch library, or some other familiar place. People are recruited both through doorknocking and the invitation of members of the Organizing Committee. In addition to providing a recruitment opportunity, the housemeeting serves as a training ground for the emerging leadership and a forum for discussing and testing new issues.

A typical agenda includes introductions, discussion of the issues, explanation of the organization, collection of dues, and recruitment for the first meeting. Again, slide shows can be extremely effective as a catalyst for focused discussion and as a means of bringing the organization to life. These small meetings provide an opportunity for organizers to observe the new leadership in action, and they can play a number of roles—including the collection of dues. Housemeetings often are the organizer’s best means of assessing leadership potential and provide members of the Organizing Committee with invaluable experience.

The person hosting the meeting plays a key role, welcoming people as they arrive, making them feel comfortable, and engaging them in conversation. It’s especially important to put the early arrivals at ease and get them talking with one another. As the meeting begins, a host should handle the introductions and give a short enthusiastic rap about her or his own organizational involvement. The host and other new leaders should take responsibility for as much of the agenda as possible.

The group setting creates reinforcement—either positive or negative—for participation and dues collection, since there’s a tendency for people to follow the lead of those who first react to the organizing pitch. Therefore, it’s helpful to have a few people who already plan to join the GCO attend these meetings. When the dues pitch is made, these folks can be asked to join first, thereby creating a positive precedent. Otherwise, an educated guess must be made as to who is most likely to join.

Of course the prior commitment must be as solid and tight as possible. I once held a housemeeting at the home of a key neighborhood opinion leader who had enthusiastically agreed to join the organization. The meeting was a tremendous success, with seventeen people in attendance and a spirited discussion of the issues. As I wound up my dues rap, I confidently asked the host if she was ready to join. She quickly agreed, but as I handed her a membership card she added, “But I won’t have any money for another month because of the Christmas holidays.” Almost immediately, everyone else at the meeting took the same position. Despite my most eloquent pleas, I wasn’t able to sign any of them up as a member until after Christmas. Reinforcement works both ways.

While housemeetings have many benefits, including involvement of the
Organizing Committee, full discussion of new issues, and possible positive reinforcement for dues collection, they do take time to set up and, of course, cost a night of doorknocking. For that reason, when building chapters of a turf organization, I usually only hold two or three housemeetings during the drive. However, in situations where organizing will be confined to only one neighborhood and time is less of a factor, a slower but more intensive model, utilizing a series of intermediate housemeetings leading to a chapter-formation meeting, may be preferable.* And housemeetings may be the featured method when organizing by identity or in a workplace arena. But under almost all circumstances, a minimum of several housemeetings will strengthen the leadership and improve the overall drive considerably. One caution is in order, however. Unless well constructed, there is a danger that members will confuse housemeetings with the formation meeting and skip attending the latter. The problem can be avoided by building in preparations for the big meeting as part of each housemeeting agenda.

**Formation Meeting**

The Organizing Committee continues to meet throughout the doorknocking drive. Recruitment progress is assessed at each meeting, new OC members may be added, issues are discussed and researched, and targets and demands are clarified. As the formation meeting approaches, its agenda is set, roles and tasks are divided, and role-playing practice begins to take place. These meetings also help build the momentum and excitement for the upcoming formation meeting. The committee usually makes a plan for general publicity, including announcements in church bulletins, posters in local stores or community agencies, and sometimes even a small local newspaper article. Again, such publicity is designed to serve as reinforcement for those who already are planning to attend, rather than as a primary source of recruitment. There is no real attempt to recruit people who have not engaged in a face-to-face conversation about the organization. A large influx of such people at a first meeting generally will be counterproductive, causing varying degrees of confusion, dissension, and disruption. For similar reasons, there is an attempt to identify and, if possible, neutralize various politicians and other individuals who have their own agendas that are inconsistent with the goals of the developing GCO.

Certainly, the most effective form of supplemental communication is the reminder phone call to those people whose names and phone numbers appear

*Such a model often is more effective in rural areas where the distances between houses make doorknocking less practical. Housemeetings also may provide an essential intermediate educational step when the organizing involves complex, abstract issues or when the constituency is reluctant to get involved. I believe that Fred Ross is the organizer most responsible for developing the housemeeting model of organizing.
on the sign-up sheet. Members of the Organizing Committee should make these calls; generally ten calls is a reasonable number to ask someone to make. Responses should be tallied in the appropriate “yes,” “no,” and “maybe” columns. For purposes of estimating numbers, only the solid “yes” answers are counted. People frequently have a tendency to tell the caller what they think he or she wants to hear, rather than what they actually intend to do. The inexperienced caller often gives “maybes” the benefit of the doubt and overestimates attendance. Accurate turnout predictions for organizational events are critical to successful organizational planning and action. Therefore, precise counting methods should be learned as soon as possible. When predicting turnout, never give a “maybe” the benefit of the doubt.

The timing of these calls also is important. Obviously, the calls will have the maximum impact if made one or two days prior to the big meeting. If earlier calls are desired, then two sets of calls should be made—one about a week before the meeting, and one immediately prior to it, best if done by a different caller. Never make these calls between three and five days before a meeting; this is too early for a final reminder, and too late to allow a second call without being insulting.

The three primary activities that will take place at the first meeting are the election of temporary officers, the ratification of several issue campaigns, and the collection of dues from those who haven’t already joined. The Organizing Committee is responsible for planning and preparing for this meeting. Much of this work is done at the last OC meeting, where the final agenda is set, issue campaign recommendations are made, roles for the first meeting are assigned, and elections are discussed. It makes sense to hold temporary elections when the organization first is formed. This minimizes the dangers of the GCO locking into untested and possibly ineffective leadership for a long period of time. Initial elections for a three-month period seem to work very well. This allows sufficient time for the new leadership to be assessed by the other members. After three months have elapsed, new elections are held covering a term of one year.

The organizer does not interfere with the election process, but does make sure that at least one competent person (usually a member of the Organizing Committee) will run for each elected position. Members of the Committee are asked to think about possible nominees, and in turn these people are approached about their willingness to run for office. Of course, there will be an open election with nominations from the floor at the first meeting, but candidates and nominations should be lined up by the Committee in advance.

Similarly, the Committee should decide on several issue campaigns to recommend at the formation meeting. These issues are an outgrowth of the organizing drive and represent problems that a large number of the community members have identified. During the course of the drive, the OC will have done preliminary research on these issues and planned an
initial action strategy. It’s important for the new GCO to achieve some success on the first few issues it tackles. Early victories will overcome initial skepticism and help establish the organization’s reputation as a winner. Thus, the issues chosen should have broad appeal and handles for a winning strategy.

The Committee also divides up the various leadership roles that must be performed at the first meeting. Someone will chair the meeting, Committee members will present the recommended issue campaigns for approval, and a dues pitch will be made. Other roles include community members who “testify” about the need for organization, as well as volunteers to pass clipboards with sign-up sheets for issue committees. Volunteers will handle tables at the entrance (make sure only one door is used), where dues will be collected, agendas passed out, and attendance sheets signed.

Members of the committee also will assist the organizer in setting up the meeting hall. Ideally, folding chairs will be used with slightly fewer in place than the lowest attendance estimate. This insures that there will be no empty seats—a factor of no small psychological importance. Of course, extra chairs are kept close at hand; setting them up as people stream in helps further the sense that the turnout is better than expected.

The agenda will include the following:

- Welcome by the OC Chair
- The Need to Organize: Guest Speakers, “Testimony” by Community Members
- Presentation and Vote on Issue Campaigns
- Open Discussion on Other Issues
- Collection of Membership Dues
- Nominations and Election of Temporary Officers
- Action Plan and Wrap-up

Often a member of the local clergy may open the meeting with a short prayer and speech about the need to organize. Speakers from other chapters or similar GCOs also can emphasize the importance of organizing and give concrete examples of successful collective action efforts. Testimonials from local Organizing Committee members add considerable spice to the meeting.

Like all organizational meetings, the first one should lead to a clear plan or process for collective action. The format for issue discussions varies in different organizing models. Some favor purely open discussion, while others feature the presentation of an already existing action plan by the Organizing Committee. I prefer structured discussion of the recommen-
dations of the Committee, with a short open-issues forum to follow. Action is confined to the Committee recommendations with other issues referred for future discussion. Rather than announcing the time and place for an action, I lean toward adding a step whereby interested members can attend a committee meeting to finalize strategy. I feel this is both structured and yet participatory; the committee retains control but the new people are integrated so they fully can own the issue campaign strategy.

Many people will have paid dues during the organizing drive, while others will pay at the door. Nevertheless, a good explanation of where the dues money goes and how the GCO works is in order. This is followed by a fiery dues pitch. Only those who have paid the dues will be allowed to vote in the elections. Voting for candidates usually is done by hand at first meetings with paid members being issued a small, colored piece of paper to hold up when voting.

The election should be chaired by the visiting GCO member or the organizer. A member of the clergy is an excellent choice to count the votes. Candidates may or may not make speeches, depending on the rules, but they should leave the room while the voting takes place. Officer positions will vary according to structure, but typically include a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary.

Following the meeting, the organizer should visit or contact all those who intended to attend but did not. These “cleanup” visits should be conducted as soon after the meeting as possible in order to capitalize on the momentum created. Having done this, the organizer will have completed the drive, but not the doorknocking. Recruitment never ends, whether it be for action campaigns, fundraising events, or membership drives. So don’t knock it—do it!
FRAMEWORK FOR GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS (GCOs)

**WHO**
- Membership
- Leadership
- Staffing
- Structure

**WHAT**
- Goals and Objectives

**WHOM**
- Target Systems

**HOW**
- Strategies and Tactics
- Finances
- Allies
- Communications
STEPS TO FORM A GCO

Groundwork

Turf, Demographics, Key Institutions, Community-Based Organizations and Agencies, Powerful Actors, Existing Issues, Potential Issues, Objective Conditions, and Political Trends

Organizing Committee (OC)

Gatekeepers

Opinion Leaders: Credentialing, Discovery, The Vision, Commitment

Finding Issues

General Recruitment Drive

OC Meetings

Doorknocking

Housemeetings

Formation Meeting

Welcome by the OC Chair

The Need to Organize: Guest Speakers, “Testimony” by Community Members

Presentation and Vote on Issue Campaigns

Open Discussion on Other Issues

Collection of Membership Dues

Nominations and Election of Temporary Officers

Action Plan and Wrap-Up
Chapter 4

“Analyze, Strategize, and Catalyze”

Issues and Strategy

CHOOSING ISSUES

Issue campaigns are both ends and means. Grassroots community organizations are formed as vehicles to address issues of concern, and the process of taking collective action on those issues helps develop the group’s capacity to accomplish future goals and objectives. A GCO’s ability to deal successfully with any issue is a function of its level of organizational development. Like (and because of) the people within them, organizations grow through experience and practice; issue campaigns are the very lifeblood of that process. Through them, new people are attracted, existing members remain active, and leadership abilities come to flower. The interrelationship between organizational development and issue campaigns cannot be overemphasized.

The best issue campaigns will develop organizational mileage while simultaneously appealing to the self-interests of community members. Therefore, when choosing an issue, a GCO must be concerned about not only whether it can be won but also how the campaign will develop the group. The choices frequently will be difficult, and decisions should be made carefully. The issues should come from the current and potential members, rather than from other parties who have their own self-interests. Among the worst potential offenders of this principle are politicians, who frequently attempt to latch onto community groups in order to further their own political agendas. As previously discussed, organizers (both insiders and outsiders) also are not immune to this abuse and should be sensitive to the dangers of imposing (directly or indirectly) their own ideas on the group. This can result from ideological baggage, too much of a personal stake in a particular issue, or becoming too conservative when thinking about what really is possible. Too often there is a tendency to shy away from issues that
have not yet produced victories. It is a mistake to equate winnability with previous success.

The last chapter described the process of finding potential issues by talking with community members and trying out various themes. This kind of exploration can be done in a variety of settings where significant numbers of people are found, such as organizational meetings, actions, and events. Two of the best ways of surfacing and testing new issues are through doorknocking and housemeetings. In both cases, organizers and leaders raise questions, agitate, and engage in the issue-cutting process discussed in Chapter 3.

It should be remembered that there are not any shortcuts for testing new issues. It may be tempting simply to discuss a possible issue among the top leadership, but this common mistake overlooks one key factor. The highest leaders may be so committed to the GCO that their notion of self-interest has broadened to the point where they are no longer typical of rank-and-file members. Thus, they may be very poor judges of what issue campaigns will appeal most widely and deeply to the rest of the membership. Within the organization, issues should be tested and selected with as much bottom-up participation as possible. To do otherwise is to risk a campaign without a large base of committed people.

There are two key dimensions—depth and breadth. Depth refers to how intensely community members feel about an issue, while breadth relates to how widespread that concern is. The strongest issues will be deeply felt by a broad cross-section of the community. For instance, a proposal to run a new inner-belt highway through a low-income urban neighborhood might be strongly opposed by virtually everyone living in the area. This is the best type of issue because it has both depth and breadth, thereby helping to ensure that large numbers of the affected constituency would participate in collective action to resist construction of the highway.

In the same neighborhood, we can assume that people living close to an abandoned house taken over by drug dealers would be deeply concerned. However, residents located ten blocks away might not even be aware of the existence of this problem. This potential issue would have depth, but not a lot of breadth. A solid core of highly committed people probably could be recruited to take action, but the base from which to draw participants would be circumscribed. These are the second-best types of issues.

And also in the same area, one can imagine the possibility that beautification of the parks might be widely supported, yet not be on many people’s top ten list of concerns. Issues that have a broad but also bland self-interest draw are the third most desirable. The lack of passion raises serious questions about the degree of community involvement. Finally, if an issue has neither broad nor deep appeal (perhaps global warming in this low-income neighborhood), forget about it.

While GCOs generally should embark on new campaigns only after
considerable discussion and analysis, at times they have little choice but to respond to a particular issue. For instance, a neighborhood group probably would be expected to react to the closing of the local fire station, suspension of trash pickup, or construction of a luxury apartment building where low-income housing once stood. Similarly, a welfare rights group hardly could overlook a legislative proposal to eliminate a childcare stipend for recipients entering the workforce. The positive aspect of such situations is that many people will be angry and ready to take action. The danger is that the GCO may be forced to bite off more than it can chew. Regardless, in instances such as these, the organization really cannot afford to walk away if it wants to do the right thing and also hopes to retain its credibility. It is a time to fight the good fight—win, lose, or draw.

Many GCOs also will choose to be involved in more than one issue campaign at a time. Indeed, this usually is desirable, providing the organization has a multi-issue focus. However, the group must be careful not to spread itself too thin in the process. There is no simple answer to the question of how many issues a GCO should take on. Resources are a key factor, as are the level of organizational development and the demands of the other issue campaigns. Another significant factor is timing. It is certainly possible to run several campaigns simultaneously, if some are relatively quick, while others are more protracted. In the final analysis, each situation must be assessed individually within the context of the two primary goals of winning basic issues of immediate concern to the members and furthering organizational development.

The normal rules for decision making will vary according to the particular GCO’s structure, but fundamentally the process should be democratic and involve as many members as possible. In addition to being a worthy organizational end in itself, a democratic process helps ensure that a broad base of members begins to feel ownership of the issue campaign and the developing strategy. Large numbers of people usually will be necessary both to achieve a victory on the issue and to develop increased organizational mileage.

Additionally, all decisions about issues should be made on a strategic basis. A strategy simply is a well-thought-out approach to achieve a goal and specific objectives. Strategic thinking is systematic, logical, and analytical; it is highly rational and focuses on a methodical line of action necessary to achieve the desired ends. Formulating a successful strategy requires the ability to anticipate likely outcomes. Each possible option for organizational action will produce a reaction from the target system; strategic analysis allows predictions about the most probable results from each alternative. Based on those predictions, wiser choices and decisions can be made.

Unfortunately, many people are put off by this whole notion of strategic analysis and planning. Perhaps it sounds too academic, or maybe it’s
because they’ve been convinced—by themselves or someone else—that they can’t do it. Or maybe they just don’t think it’s important. Whatever the reasons, resistance to systematic analysis and planning is common. In reality, strategic planning is simply common sense; practically anyone can do it regardless of age, sex, race, educational background, or a host of other factors that are sometimes cited as barriers. As organizations mature, their leaders and members become able to take on increasingly more complex issue campaigns with strategies that unfold in a series of steps, each predicated on the outcome of the last. Like a chess master, the best strategists will be able to think through the implications of most variables and then lay out the stages of the campaign, along with its timetable, to its logical ending point.

Since organizational resources are limited and every issue cannot be addressed, it is not sufficient simply to choose an issue and then develop a strategy. That approach locks the organization into a campaign before all factors can be evaluated. Rather, issues should be chosen on the basis of a strategic analysis that determines in advance whether they can be won and if they produce organizational mileage.

**ORGANIZATIONAL MILEAGE CONSIDERATIONS**

The following questions help focus attention on the most vital considerations when assessing the potential of a possible issue campaign for developing the organization. Of course, the complete answers to many of these questions will not be known until after the GCO actually engages in the campaign. Indeed, these topics should be reexamined in even greater detail as part of a systematic postcampaign evaluation process. Nevertheless, much can be determined and predicted ahead of time. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but it is illustrative of the kind of thinking called for in order to do a strategic analysis.

- Is the issue consistent with the long- and middle-range goals of the organization?
- Will the issue be unifying or divisive?
- What is the GCO’s capacity to undertake this issue campaign at the present time?
- Will the campaign help the GCO grow?
- Will the campaign provide a good educational experience for leaders and members, developing their consciousness, independence, and skills?
- Will the GCO receive credit for a victory on the issue, improve its credibility, and increase its overall visibility?
• How will the campaign affect organizational resources?
• Will the campaign develop new allies and/or enemies?
• Will the campaign emphasize collective action, producing new strategies, tactics, or issues?
• Will the campaign produce a significant victory?

**Consistency**

*Is the issue consistent with the long-range goals of the organization?*

How will this issue campaign fit in with the overall organizational vision and mission? Will it help move the GCO along that path, or will it involve a detour or even a basic change in direction? For instance, a tenants’ organization in a low-income neighborhood might be considering involvement in a campaign to fight cutbacks in bus service—an issue of concern to many members. While not dealing specifically with housing, the transportation issue is one that might have a direct impact on many of the GCO’s low-income constituents.

One of the many factors the group should consider before making a decision on this issue will be the campaign’s impact on future organizational directions. Will other housing issues be neglected while this transportation campaign is undertaken, or will this fight complement other organizational actions? Does this signal the start of a new multi-issue approach? Is this issue a “one-shot” effort or does it naturally lead to similar, but more ambitious, transportation campaigns? Is this issue in alignment with the basic values of the organization’s members? Will this campaign build the power of the GCO to represent the interests of low-income tenants better than other issues would? Beyond these questions, what are the GCO’s long- and middle-range goals, and how have they been determined?

**Unity**

*Will the issue be unifying or divisive?*

There is no question that serious internal splits will weaken any GCO. It is important to consider how a potentially divisive issue relates to the organization’s ultimate goals. Sometimes people on each side of an issue may argue that it’s intimately intertwined with the group’s long-term goals. One faction may contend that by taking a position, the GCO virtually will destroy itself, while others argue that if a stand is not taken, the group will not be worth saving—“If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” These situations often have no easy solution, and feelings will run high, but a clear understanding of one fundamental principle is essential: *Any issue campaign that weakens the organizational base jeopardizes the attainment of all other goals.*
It may be possible to have both a broad organizational base and a perfect score on that great ideological issues chart in the sky. However, the GCO that bites the bullet on too many divisive issues may find itself with a pure ideological record but only a handful of self-righteous true believers. Nevertheless, it’s also essential to move beyond narrow self-interest and to analyze the root causes of social issues that tend to be divisive. Progressive GCOs can’t afford not to take strong positions against initiatives that are racist, sexist, homophobic, anti-immigrant, or targeted against any other group. These are situations where moral integrity is on the line and the group must “do the right thing.” In such instances, it’s imperative to rally together strongly in solidarity. An organization needs to stand up for its principles and goals, but in order to be effective, it also needs lots of people standing up with it.

An important safeguard is a democratic decision-making process. Both organizers and leaders need to avoid imposing their own ideological goals and visions on the rest of the organization. When controversial divisive issues arise, organizers and leaders need to come to grips with their own feelings and try to separate them from their roles within the group. When this is not possible, it should be acknowledged honestly and those whose positions run counter to the group’s consensus should withdraw as much as possible from the issue, or in some cases even leave the organization. Any good campaign on a significant issue will attract new people who agree with the GCO’s position and action. But, to a lesser degree, it also will flush out some members who did not really understand or accept the basic aims of the organization to begin with. Such minor losses of membership are healthy and should be expected.

Oftentimes, a potentially divisive issue can turn out to be unifying if it is cut and framed in a positive way. For instance, adults in a turf-based GCO might be concerned about youth violence and a rapidly rising crime rate. There might be initial sentiment to take a tough stance by demanding a stronger police presence, a “stop-and-search policy,” and a curfew. Such an approach might divide community members along generational lines. However, if neighborhood youth were included in the issue discussions, a very different tact might be taken. The GCO could work on a number of unifying community development projects, such as a youth street outreach, after-school activities, summer employment, a mentoring program, and the establishment of a new youth center.

Problems of divisiveness often are more complex for multi-issue organizations than for single-issue groups, since the former usually have a more diverse multiconstituency base. Again, the interests of different community subgroups need to be weighed against the GCO’s long-term goals. Often, common ground can be found by identifying shared or similar interests and creatively reframing issues accordingly. It is important for the GCO leadership to play an active role to prevent different factions from digging in their heels before fully exploring less divisive alternatives.
Grassroots community organizations also need to be aware of the potential for external divisions. A first step is determining whether other GCOs are working on the same issue. Perhaps there will be opportunities for an alliance or even a more formal coalition. Competition on the same issue generally should be avoided. It is usually very bad form and counterproductive to “muscle in” aggressively on another GCO’s issue. This practice can alienate community members, often will generate negative publicity, and usually upsets funders, turns off potential allies, and enables target systems to play one group off against the other. Only when the other group (or groups) clearly “sells out the community” or takes a totally different approach on the issue should this option even be considered.

When engaging in social action, GCOs will be undertaking campaigns that are polarized and involve conflict. Indeed, dividing the opposition may be an important part of a group’s strategy. However, issue campaigns do not take place in a vacuum, and not all external divisions will benefit a GCO. Sometimes, opponents will be able to drive a wedge between an organization and its potential allies. For instance, I once worked on a voter initiative campaign to restructure electric rates which were not operating to encourage conservation. Indeed, the less electricity someone used, the higher the rate at which they paid. So, low- and moderate-income residents were paying at a much higher rate per kilowatt hour than large corporations, who were given little incentive to save. However, the ballot initiative for “fair share rates” was soundly defeated when the business community mobilized and convinced labor leaders and union members that jobs would be lost if this reform measure was instituted.

Obviously, questions of unity and divisiveness must be considered carefully before any issue is selected. A mistake in this area can have profound and lasting impact on the organization.

**Capacity**

*What is the GCO’s capacity to undertake this issue at the present time?*

The two key variables are the level of organizational development and timing. Most of the factors to assess organizational mileage discussed in Chapter 3 will be relevant, especially the number of people whom the GCO can mobilize; the quality and quantity of its leadership, staff, and volunteers; its structural capacity to take on another issue; the level of agreement/disagreement from the target system; financial resources available; its ability to work with existing or potential allies; and the effectiveness of its internal and external communications systems. As discussed immediately below, there is potential for organizational growth in most issue campaigns, and a GCO frequently increases its mileage in the process of addressing a new issue. That said, the question still remains as to whether the capacity exists to take on this particular issue at this moment. If the requisite level of de-
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velopment hasn’t been achieved, there’s a very good chance that the GCO won’t be able to succeed, especially if the change effort is ambitious and serious resistance can be expected from the target system.

Even a well-developed group may have difficulties if the timing is wrong. For instance, the organization may be heavily involved in one or more other campaigns that drain its resources and limit its ability to focus enough attention on the new issue. External problems also might include strained relations with important allies, upcoming state or municipal elections to work on, attacks in the media from various opponents, or the loss of a key funding source. Or there may be internal challenges at this particular time, such as divisions between one or more factions, a recent turnover in leadership or staff, a funding crisis, an upcoming annual convention, or a membership renewal drive. So a GCO’s willingness and ability to take on a new issue can vary dramatically, depending on what else is on its plate.

Occasionally, research will show that minimal social action almost will guarantee a victory due to a variety of situational factors. Generally, such a campaign is called a “fixed fight,” providing an opportunity for both a concrete success and the development of organizational mileage. Such fixed fights are especially valuable in the early stages of a GCO’s life, when there’s a great need to win on an issue and establish a strong track record. Often, the greatest difficulty in such cases may be acting quickly and decisively enough to get both credit and credibility.

While a fixed fight can furnish a welcome and timely victory, the search for such situations should be kept in political and time perspective. GCOs should not fall into the trap of hunting for sure things. The best campaigns will stretch all facets of an organization, forcing it to extend itself fully as it challenges the status quo and pushes for social change. Creating a good mix of difficult issues with fixed fights is a strategic task requiring skillful analysis and a keen sense of timing.

Growth

Will the campaign help the organization grow?

A GCO’s ultimate source of power is large numbers of involved community members. The best campaigns will have depth and breadth of appeal on immediate, specific, and winnable issues. They should lend themselves to the kind of systematic face-to-face recruitment that can be done through one-on-ones, doorknocking, home visits, housemeetings, networking, and presentations to various community groups. As the various phases of the campaign unfold, ample opportunity for direct participation by large numbers of people should be built into all organizational activities. This will be accomplished most effectively through participatory collective action tactics. The recruitment and involvement of large numbers of people will pro-
vide much of the leverage necessary to win the issue campaign, while simultaneously expanding and building the membership base.

In addition to increasing membership, a good campaign also should engage and develop new leaders—a principle that is not emphasized adequately in many GCOs. Organizational leadership should be spread among many people, rather than lodged in the hands of a few. This collective form of leadership depends on the infusion of new people who bring added skills and energy to the group. A good issue campaign should be able to attract new leaders and involve them in important roles. In some cases, people who never before were active will participate, while in other instances, former “second-line” leaders will move into positions of increased responsibility and prominence. Most GCOs periodically suffer the loss of some leaders, and the infusion of new leadership blood through issue campaigns can compensate for such attrition.

Some issues are particularly effective in expanding organizational membership and leadership, because they appeal to more than one natural constituency. ACORN’s “Squatters’ Campaign,” demanding that abandoned houses be turned over to low-income homesteaders, illustrates the point. The campaign appealed to the organization’s traditional neighborhood base that was concerned with the threats to health, safety, property values, and neighborhood stability posed by abandoned houses in the vicinity. And it appealed to a second constituency of low-income families in dire need of affordable, adequate housing. Their self-interests converged in the homesteading demand, and the campaign brought new blood into the organization.

Finally, GCOs that hope to expand their geographic territory or turf can do so most easily through systematic recruitment on a compelling issue. Much of the suspicion and resistance common to such an expansion effort will melt away in the face of a hot issue and an appealing action plan to deal with it.

**Education**

*Will the campaign provide a good educational experience for leaders and members, developing their consciousness, independence, and skills?*

When organizing, the principles of John Dewey should be borne in mind: people learn best through action and experience. An issue campaign can provide an educational experience that dozens of consciousness-raising sessions, workshops, books, films, or seminars never could match. In a campaign, learning takes place within the context of actual life experience; there is a unique opportunity for the development of political awareness and analytic, strategic planning abilities. Skills can be learned in a wide range of areas including (but not limited to) action research, recruitment, holding effective meetings, direct-action tactics, negotiating,
working with the media, legislative lobbying, and supportive grassroots fundraising. The development of these abilities and skills will lessen the GCO’s dependence on organizers and other professionals.

Learning takes place in a four-step process (Chavez, 1990) that should involve as many people as possible: (1) analyzing situations and envisioning social change, (2) making plans accordingly, (3) carrying those plans into action, and (4) evaluating the results. There is often a tendency to concentrate on developing frontline leadership while overlooking the rest of the membership, but that is a serious mistake. It’s important to use campaign opportunities to educate the full membership, especially second-line leaders who may be moving into top positions in the future.

Obviously, it is not always functional to have the entire membership involved in intricate strategic planning, but people can be polled by the leadership on various options, and briefings before all actions can explain the strategic line of thinking to everyone. The more that people feel part of the process of making organizational decisions and plans, the greater will be their sense of ownership and investment in the campaign, creating a more committed and loyal membership. And to the extent that those campaigns achieve a degree of success, active participants will develop perceptions of increased self- and collective efficacy (Pecukonis and Wenocur, 1994)—a belief that they have more ability to gain a greater measure of control over their life circumstances.

The evaluation of issue campaigns provides an excellent opportunity to develop greater political awareness, increased critical consciousness, and more sophisticated analysis of how social systems work. For instance, a campaign to force a local bank to invest more home improvement and mortgage funds in the neighborhood naturally leads to an analysis of how banks operate and how investment patterns work to the disadvantage of low-income people. Or a campaign to clean up a hazardous waste site in a neighborhood of color logically moves to the subject of environmental racism, which in turn links to analysis and critique of the roles of both government and the private sector in perpetuating institutional racism.

The immediate campaign provides a specific context and experience within which these larger issues can be raised. Hopefully, this process will lead to new campaigns on the larger issues themselves, rather than simple intellectual dialogue. For instance, ACORN’s local campaigns to make changes in individual borrowers’ loans have evolved into regional and national efforts to eliminate predatory lending practices. As community members develop a better understanding of their GCO’s potential to bring about small but important changes in their lives, they become more committed to building a powerful organization that can win larger victories and achieve more systemic change.
Credit

Will the GCO receive credit for a victory on the issue, improve its credibility, and increase its overall visibility?

While we may resent the person who always wants the acclaim when good things happen, a GCO should be aggressive about taking credit where it is due. For one thing, an organization’s ability to raise funds and secure additional resources may be linked to the credit it gets for its victories. Second, new members may be attracted by the organization’s publicity and winning image. Third, the group may be able to establish greater respect and credibility as a result of receiving credit.

GCOs may receive both internal credit within the community and external credit outside it. External credit most typically is secured through the press and electronic media. Most organizations are very conscious of the type of press and media coverage they receive and go to some pains to secure it (see Weltman in Chapter 7). Unfortunately, it isn’t always forthcoming. When this happens, the group still may receive proper credit “on the street” within its own community.

Sometimes the GCO needs to help the process along at the local level. For example, imagine a community group that successfully has pressured city officials to improve trash collection in the neighborhood. The mayor ordered the sanitation commissioner to correct the problems only after being confronted by angry organization members. However, the press failed to cover this action, and the news story erroneously credited the mayor for “taking bold, aggressive action to improve neighborhood conditions.” Leaders and members could attempt to tell the real story through phone calls, the group’s newsletter, and word of mouth. There also might be an effort to enlighten the news media. But in any case, the GCO would be able to get some measure of credit within its own community. Since politicians often compete directly with grassroots organizations for credit on a variety of issues, and since they often have greater ability to influence the media, variations of the above example unfortunately are quite common.

A distinction also should be made between credit and credibility; the two frequently go together, but not necessarily. A group that has credibility will be taken seriously. The example above illustrates a failure to receive external credit, but the GCO undoubtedly increased its credibility with the mayor. Occasionally, things may work the other way. An organization may get credit for a victory, when in fact it played a minor role. For instance, a piece of legislation for which a GCO lobbied may have passed a legislative body simply as a bargaining chip in a power struggle played out between two state senators. The organization may claim and receive credit for its passage, but if the group plays this game too often—as many are tempted to do—it actually may lose credibility among legislators who know the real story. There also is the added danger of leaders and members believing
their own press clippings, even when they are untrue. This can lead to over-confidence, confusion over the GCO’s true source of power, and a drift away from collective action tactics.

Many leaders and members may be inclined to say, “Who cares who gets the credit as long as we get a victory on our issue?” But in order to build organizational mileage, credit and visibility will be important. Although this is difficult to predict, the best campaigns should have the potential for giving the organization increased visibility, credit, and credibility.

**Resources**

*How will the campaign affect organizational resources?*

Obviously, the availability of organizational resources will affect the outcome of any issue campaign, as discussed above. But the reverse also is true. Campaigns, both successful and unsuccessful, often have a lasting impact on a GCO’s resources. Clearly, internal and external visibility, credit, and credibility also have a direct bearing on fundraising efforts. The organization that can attach an impressive list of victories along with an array of good press clippings to a funding proposal certainly stands a better chance of receiving external funding. Private foundations or large individual contributors often have “favorite issues,” such as housing displacement, youth employment, or immigrant rights. While an organization never should prostitute itself by choosing issues simply to get funded, a working knowledge of the fundraising potential of a campaign certainly is a legitimate factor for leaders and members to consider when making a decision.

Of course, the effect of issue campaigns on external funding can cut both ways. For example, an organization that funds part of its staff through municipal training slots had better be aware of the implications of taking on the mayor in a nasty fight. This type of situation is the major reason why GCOs should think long and hard before accepting any government funds. Or a group funded by the United Way or an old-line conservative foundation shouldn’t be surprised when a militant welfare rights campaign leads to a cutoff of funding. Organizations may choose to engage in those campaigns anyway, in spite of the risk. My only point is that the funding implications of campaigns should be considered and weighed carefully before any decisions are made. There may be sound organizational reasons for taking on a campaign that jeopardizes funding, but there is no excuse for not anticipating and preparing for the contingencies of such decisions beforehand.

Door-to-door and telephone canvassing for large numbers of small contributions fall somewhere between external and internal fundraising. There are many factors that affect canvassers’ ability to raise money, not the least of which are their enthusiasm, persistence, charm, and technical ability to deliver a good rap. Nevertheless, organizational name recognition and issues that appeal to the donor’s self-interest usually are key in-
gredients for success. Issues appealing to the self-interest of the donor raise interesting questions, since very often contributions are solicited from middle- or even upper-income people.

Thus, issues such as statewide or regional utility rate reform or lower property taxes will appeal more directly to a suburban donor’s self-interest than a militant “squatters’” housing campaign by low-income people in the inner city. While there is increased evidence that some money can be raised on almost any issue, and while a multi-issue organization can highlight its campaigns differentially when canvassing, nevertheless there is a fairly direct correlation between a GCO’s self-interest appeal to suburban residents and its canvass fundraising potential. The implications are profound for groups with a multi-issue, multiconsistency base and a heavy dependence on soliciting individual donations. Controversial, militant campaigns on issues such as welfare rights, rent control, or squatters’ housing usually will not play well in the suburbs, and GCOs must weigh the trade-offs of losing financial support or keeping it at the expense of forgoing such issues, and perhaps losing (or never even organizing) a true low-income constituency.

Finally, internal fundraising, both through membership dues and various grassroots events, will be affected by issue campaigns. Obviously, the greater the visibility, credit, and credibility of the GCO in its own community, the greater its ability to raise funds. Certain issue campaigns generate more new members than others, and people are more willing to buy a raffle ticket, attend a fundraising event, or make a donation when they care about the issues the organization is tackling. Internally divisive issues naturally will split a GCO’s grassroots funding base.

Beyond direct funding, other organizational resources will be affected by any issue campaign. These range from supplies, use of equipment, and technical expertise to, most importantly, the time of leaders, members, staff, and volunteers. Successful campaigns frequently attract future direct or in-kind donations of supplies and equipment, along with an increase in the number of volunteers. The old cliché about people loving a winner continues to be true.

And just as leaders and members develop political and organizational skills through actual campaigns, so too do staff members learn from direct experience. A good issue campaign should provide an opportunity to increase the knowledge and skills of new staff and challenge the abilities of the veterans. Generally, success breeds success in organizing, with the best staffs developing in the most effective organizations. Like any other organizational resource, staff must be cultivated, nurtured carefully, and used wisely.

Beyond an examination of a GCO’s capacity to carry off a campaign, another question remains: “Is this the best use of our resources, and what will be the effect on the rest of the organization?” While the resources to win on an issue
may exist, the organizational payoff may not be worth the sacrifices. Choosing to work on a particular issue may mean not taking on several others or becoming involved in an all-consuming effort that forces other issues and activities to be neglected. Thus, when examining potential issues, it is not enough to analyze whether they are winnable; the overall impact on funding and other organizational resources should be considered as well.

**Allies**

*Will the campaign develop new allies and/or enemies?*

An old labor union saying goes, “Make no permanent friends or enemies.” These still are wise words for both unions and GCOs, particularly when dealing with politicians. Allies and opponents can, and frequently will, shift from issue to issue. Nevertheless, relationships may be established that have lasting effects, especially between organizations. Certainly, issue campaigns provide a test under fire where feelings of trust (or distrust) may be engendered.

Organizations that work together formally in coalitions or more loosely as allies on an issue campaign have an opportunity to cooperate on specific actions, activities, and tasks. A relatively new and unknown GCO might derive both concrete assistance as well as a measure of needed legitimacy from working with another large, established organization. Both positive and negative experiences are bound to have some carryover effect; and where the former is true, the stage is set for future joint efforts. The development of such relationships clearly can be a source of increased organizational mileage. But sometimes an organization also helps define itself and what it stands for through the opposition it tackles, such as Stop the Cuts or Neighbors against Pollution.

Of course, choosing a popular opponent can cut the other way at times. But the principle remains that GCOs establish much of their identity through the kinds of issues and targets they pick and the types of campaigns they wage. When making these decisions, it is important to look at the long-term organizational significance of the friends and enemies who are chosen.

**Tactics**

*Will the campaign emphasize collective action, producing new strategies, tactics, or issues?*

The issues that produce the most organizational mileage will be those that provide the most opportunities for direct participation by large numbers of people. Campaigns featuring a high level of community involvement enable GCO leaders and members to experience their own power through
collective action. When Community Development is undertaken, the organizational lesson is, “We resolved our problem because we worked together as community members, contributing our energy, time, and skills.” If Social Action is used, the participants learn that “we can win when lots of us stick together and fight like hell.”

GCOs that utilize either Community Development or Social Action are constantly on the lookout for new internal strategies and tactics to recruit and involve more community members in collective action. Some issues may offer possibilities for different types of engagement. For instance, Chelsea Green Space Committee has been using a combination of Community Development and Social Action in its organizing around environmental issues. They undertook a Community Development cleanup of a salt marsh adjacent to Parkway Plaza, an abandoned shopping mall where they are pushing the city to establish a mix of affordable housing, small shops, and open space. The reclamation of the marsh has enabled the group to hold periodic festivals celebrating this natural resource in the midst of a densely populated, mixed industrial and residential urban area. Youth activists have led walking tours and guided canoe trips—an exercise in leadership development—while participants in these social activities have become involved with Green Space in the process. The festivals have drawn increased attention to Parkway Plaza and its future development, a highly politicized issue that probably will entail Social Action.

GCOs that regularly engage in Social Action also need to search continually for imaginative new strategies and tactics to put pressure on external decision-makers. The elements of surprise and unpredictability are important for most good actions; and innovative approaches can make the difference between success and failure. While the strategy and tactics do not necessarily have to be brand new, they should be unexpected by the opposition. For instance, a GCO that has a history of attempting to push various sponsored bills through the state legislature with mixed success and lots of opposition from large corporations might gather initiative petitions and place a proposal directly on the ballot, giving all registered voters the chance to express their opinions on the matter. Or an organization might undertake an ambitious consumer boycott campaign requiring it to reach out to a number of likely new allies in the process. Some potential issue campaigns may hold possibilities for standard tactics that an organization has not used before—sit-ins, vigils, or shop-ins, for example—and opportunities to engage in these tactics will broaden the experience and repertoire of the group’s leaders and members.

In addition to producing new strategies or tactics, a good issue also may create opportunities for new but related campaigns. Sometimes a logical progression can be seen ahead of time. For instance, the primary value of an effort to establish a landlord-tenant commission is that it sets up future opportunities for direct action. It establishes a new arena in which to
resolve grievances against targeted landlords. In other cases, a Social Action campaign may set the stage for escalation. For example, an attempt to insure that mental patients in state hospitals have the right to shower in privacy may progress to a larger campaign for a Patients’ Bill of Rights. Success on one issue can lay the groundwork for future efforts. The potential for either spinning off or escalating campaigns can be an important factor in deciding how much organizational mileage any one issue might produce.

Victory

Will the campaign produce a significant victory?

There may be times when GCOs are forced to take on an issue and fight the good fight, even though prospects for success are dim. But, to grow and flourish, organizations need victories. The next section will focus on how to develop a winning strategy. At this point, it is sufficient to point out the obvious—in the vast majority of cases, issues should not be chosen unless there is a real possibility for success, especially when the GCO is newly formed.

What constitutes a “significant” victory? Despite the importance of external credit and credibility, the membership is the final judge of whether a victory will make a substantial difference in their lives. At one level, the test is whether an issue is important and if it can be resolved successfully—a community garden established, a stop sign erected at a dangerous intersection, a closed neighborhood recreation center reopened, 100 units of affordable housing built, a proposed utility rate increase eliminated. At another level, the test is whether the GCO can be strengthened in the process, thereby increasing its power and the members’ capacity to gain a greater measure of control over their lives in the future.

Of course, at times almost certain victory will evaporate and turn into defeat. In other instances, a campaign will lose momentum, getting bogged down by forces beyond the group’s control. Occasions such as these often precipitate an organizational crisis as energy and frustration turn inward. Infighting, scapegoating, low morale, and other internal problems can result. At just such a juncture, Saul Alinsky’s classic “fight in the bank” can provide the needed remedy. The idea is to immediately take action on another easily resolved issue whenever the organization finds itself caught in an impasse or defeated on an issue campaign. Disappointment is channeled externally into constructive action.

While Alinsky clearly coined this term to describe the dynamics of Social Action, similar destructive organizational behavior is common when Community Development efforts fall short. The same principle holds. Promptly get to work on an issue that has a high potential for quick success. Thus, a community development corporation (CDC) that loses private funding to
develop low-income housing in an abandoned factory might move swiftly to initiate a new program to provide loan counseling for first-time home-owners.

When considering questions of organizational mileage, it is important to make one further distinction between types of issues. “Recruitment Issues” lend themselves to systematic outreach efforts that can attract large numbers of new participants and members. Examples would include any issue that great numbers of people care about deeply—for instance, the high cost of prescription drugs for the elderly, the closing of a neighborhood school, summer jobs for youth, a large increase in utility bills, or the discovery of a hazardous waste dump. These issues can help build the organization, providing a steady influx of new activists and leaders.

On the other hand, “Maintenance Issues” do little to build the organization numerically, but may provide mileage in other ways. These are issues that do not have a strong self-interest draw for lots of people, but nevertheless are of concern to the GCO’s leadership and core group of activists. Often they present opportunities to develop better social policy. Frequently, such issues involve taking positions on a specific piece of legislation, for instance, an act increasing the interest penalty on overdue property taxes or a city ordinance to open up meetings of the housing authority to the public. Maintenance issues can provide mileage by producing victories, establishing new allies, generating additional resources, developing enhanced political skills, and increasing visibility and credibility.

Organizational mileage is furthered when Maintenance Campaigns are politicized and unite different neighborhoods. For example, vacant lots are a traditional neighborhood concern, and collective action to clean them up is a common focus for many GCOs. But these local efforts will produce more organizational mileage if multiple neighborhood groups combine to advocate a city ordinance that charges landlords the cost of cleanups and places liens on their property for unpaid bills. Winning the ordinance creates new campaign opportunities, targeting individual landowners and demanding city enforcement. However, serious problems can arise when GCOs stop recruiting and concentrate too heavily on Maintenance Issues that only involve a small core of activists.

DEVELOPING A WINNING STRATEGY

Winning victories, empowering people, and bringing about change are what organizing is all about. Without good strategic thinking, none of this is possible. Before making an Action Plan, there are two preliminary phases that are critical: Cutting and Framing the Issue and Conducting a Strategic Analysis. While the process seldom breaks down neatly into such well-defined categories, the two are distinct and should be considered separately.
Cutting and Framing the Issue: Action Group, Goals and Objectives, Target System, and Handles

In order to develop the basic outlines of an issue campaign, it is useful to ask the same question utilized for examining any GCO: “Who wants What from Whom and How is this to be accomplished?” Answers to this four-part question enable us to examine the Action Group who seeks change, what Goals and Objectives they are pursuing, the Target System that they intend to activate or influence, and how they will employ Handles to achieve their ends. As discussed in Chapter 3, the issue is cut and framed when these questions are answered. Additional factors to consider follow.

**Action Group.** In Chapter 3, I discussed how the organizer talks with people during the organizing drive to help surface discontent and carve out actionable issues. Once a GCO is established, this process remains much the same. The people who participate in an issue campaign will feel it’s in their self-interest to do so. The issues with the strongest self-interest draw will be immediate, specific, and winnable and have both depth and breadth of appeal. The depth of an issue’s appeal is partly a function of the emotional response it triggers.

Frequently, defensive issues (e.g., “stop the cutbacks”) seem to arouse more passion than do efforts to win a positive reform or program. Often, positive efforts actually are framed in negative terms. Thus, a campaign to bring in more city services adopts the slogan “Save the neighborhood,” whereas a traffic light issue is conducted under the banner of “Stop endangering our kids.” The famous ACORN chant “We’re fired up, won’t take it no more!” captures the essence of the defensive fight; it’s an active response to an intolerable situation. Like the proverbial “straw that breaks the camel’s back,” such issues may be able to activate people who never have participated before. Often these are NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) issues that provoke a strong emotional response from community members who perceive their interests as being threatened. Not surprisingly, spontaneous organizing efforts frequently have grown out of defensive situations.

Of course, many campaigns to bring about a positive change generate plenty of emotion and anger. Issues such as Living Wage, affordable housing, and immigrant rights have moved many thousands of people into action over the past few years. Furthermore, any GCO that seeks to empower people must move beyond the realm of defensive responses that “tame” the behavior of institutional decision-makers to proactive campaigns that transform power relationships (Miller, 1971). But it is critical to frame these positive efforts in a manner that generates sufficient passion to move lots of people.

The Action Group may be synonymous with a well-established GCO’s own membership, especially if a Maintenance Issue has been cut and
framed. As the campaign develops, the GCO simply activates its own previously organized base to engage in collective action. The more diversity within the group’s own membership and the more it takes a multi-issue approach, the more likely that those existing members will have differential interests in prospective issues. For instance, homeowner members are more apt to be interested in a campaign for property tax rebates than tenants, while those same renters probably will be more inclined to participate in a campaign to improve housing inspections for violations of the state sanitary code than small landlord members.

Typically, the Action Group will be a combination of current and potential members, who will be recruited around the new issue. Those people who get involved in the campaign almost certainly will be asked to join the organization. However, the Action Group may transcend a particular GCO’s actual or potential members and include allied groups, such as a community-labor coalition (see Simmons, Chapter 7). In any event, when cutting an issue, the action group will be the likely participants in the campaign.

**Goals and Objectives.** The goals are what people want done to solve a problem or to make a change—an end to human rights violations in mental hospitals, parent involvement in the schools, tax reform, traffic safety, or immigrant rights. As previously discussed, objectives are specific outcomes that contribute to the achievement of goals and are time sensitive—the adoption by Memorial Day of a new mental health department policy on the use of forced restraints and seclusion in state psychiatric hospitals, the creation of parent site councils in all schools by the next academic year, the passage of a graduated state income tax in the upcoming legislative session, traffic lights at five dangerous intersections within two months, or access to health care, education, and driver’s licenses for immigrants within one year. The goals of a successful issue campaign have to be clear and compelling; community members need to strongly support these ends. Cutting and framing the issue necessitate determining what specific objectives will move the GCO toward its ultimate goal. Objectives must be concrete and realistic.

Possible solutions to the problem at hand should be tested with a number of people as part of the issue-cutting and framing process. It is important to start by finding out which options community members really want. There should be a true bottom-up process, not merely a ratification of the goals and objectives of leaders, organizers, planners, politicians, or various interested parties. Testing different alternatives helps people develop ownership of both the issue and the strategy to resolve it. This investment is essential for the campaign to be truly broad-based and participatory. To the degree that community members feel genuine passion about an issue’s goals and objectives, they will be motivated to invest the energy and time necessary to achieve success.
Once there is a general sense of the preferable solution(s), a determination must be made about how realistic the various possibilities are. This is an area where action research plays a key role (see Collette, Chapter 7). Good research is essential in order to predict the potential for accomplishing particular objectives. As much as possible, the GCO’s leaders should be involved in the research process. As new information is learned, it should be shared with the full Action Group. Thus, public housing tenants who are unhappy with the dumpsters provided for trash collection should be informed as soon as it is discovered that the Housing Authority is sitting on an unspent sum of money provided by HUD to “solve the trash problems.” Similarly, where drastic cuts in federal funding or local tax revenues make a proposed solution totally unrealistic, there should be a discussion of the obstacles rather than an avoidance of the subject. Formulating objectives is a dynamic process that evolves as more information is gathered and viable options are presented.

The specifics will continue to be shaped and refined as more and more factors are weighed and analyzed. At this point in time, as the issue first is cut and framed, it is sufficient to draw the broad outline of what is wanted. Again, it should be emphasized that the objectives will be a function of who the Action Group is, the Target System that they intend to activate or influence, and how they can use handles to achieve their ends.

**Target System.** In order to pursue its objectives, the Action Group attempts to activate an internal (Community Development) or influence an external (Social Action) target system. There are a number of factors to consider when determining whom to target. When a Community Development approach is utilized, an original action group targets the larger community, attempting to motivate those who are not active at that time to join the action group. A similar process occurs in Social Action. However, uninvolved community members are the penultimate targets of Community Development, while they are activated as a means to help pressure external targets in turn when Social Action is undertaken.

The first criterion for a social action target is someone who has the power to make concrete, specific decisions on the action group’s objectives, which usually are referred to as “demands.” Saul Alinsky’s famous dictum says it all: “Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it” (1971, p. 130). Thus, when targeting an institution, it is important to understand the decision-making process thoroughly and then to fix responsibility accurately with the key individuals who have relevant power, such as the governor, the corporate CEO, the mayor, the commissioner, the city council, or the school committee.

In doing so, it is important to understand the “chain of command” and also to distinguish between formal and informal decision-making processes, remembering that those who wield the most power may not always occupy the most visible positions. The Action Group may have to
move first on those who are officially responsible, thereby smoking out the powers-that-be. In other instances, the best strategy will be to move directly on the hidden powers. Similarly, the GCO may call for strict adherence to orthodox decision-making procedures or it may push for creative changes in established practices. The specific initial pressure points may vary, but ultimately the target must have the ability to meet the organization’s demands and be accessible to pressure from them.

Here again, good research is a must. It is impossible to fight a whole bureaucracy; individuals who can make the necessary decisions should be singled out as targets and not allowed off the hook. It’s critical that the right target be chosen in the first place. Clearly fixing responsibility on the proper people helps focus the GCO’s energy and brings the issue to life for community members. There is nothing like a villain to energize a campaign. For instance, M-POWER targeted the director of a large psychiatric hospital where patients were receiving poor care and three deaths had occurred over a one-year period. On Valentine’s Day, the director was confronted by a large demonstration, during which M-POWER members passed out empty heart-shaped boxes of chocolates containing cards asking him to “have a heart” and treat patients with dignity and proper care. Under continued pressure from this action group, he soon resigned, and a new director took office and soon agreed reforms.

Social Action targets also need to be accessible and vulnerable to the Action Group’s pressure. Understanding the target’s self-interest helps any GCO assess the degree of leverage that it can bring to bear. It will have the ability to influence the target to the extent that it can impact positive or negative self-interests, such as votes, customers, public image, career advancement, or retaining positions. At times, a GCO may have limited direct leverage vis-à-vis a particular target. In such instances, indirect secondary targets may be utilized.

For example, a health care coalition might target a teaching hospital in a Social Action campaign by pressuring it to provide concrete “community benefits” for the low-income neighborhood where it is located. If the hospital CEO were unresponsive to the action group, individuals sitting on the facility’s board might be targeted. Business and civic leaders, as well as officials from the affiliated university, might be more vulnerable to negative publicity than the CEO. They also might even support the coalition’s goals and objectives or be neutral on this matter. In any event, they would probably be less likely to dig in their heels and resist, especially if the publicity were bad for their respective businesses, the university’s image, and individuals’ reputations. While the CEO might not be responsive to the direct action of the community coalition, he or she most likely would pay attention to pressure from influential board members. Indirect secondary targets should meet two criteria: (1) ability to influence the primary target, and (2) vulnerability to pressure from the Action Group.
**Handles.** As Dylan sang, “The pump don’t work ’cause the vandals took the handle.” You can’t open a door without some form of handle, and you can’t grab hold of an organizing issue without one either. *Handles are points of leverage that an Action Group can use to influence or activate a target system.* Whether they are elections, “hero opportunities,” events, or regulations, handles are how change efforts move from the realm of hope to real accomplishments. They are a means through which Action Groups can overcome resistance or inertia. The leverage of handles gets target systems moving in the right direction, making decisions and taking action in a way that is consistent with the action group’s goals and objectives for social change. Handles can be either positive incentives (“carrots”) or negative sanctions (“sticks”).

All things being equal, carrots are preferable to sticks, since there is a greater likelihood that the affected target system really will internalize changes with positive payoffs. Unfortunately, all things are not equal, which often is why a GCO is formed in the first place. Under such circumstances, Social Action is taken, and handles are utilized to pressure targets to act in a particular manner or to modify or stop certain activities. Handles also can provide a reason for why the Action Group’s position is justifiable, such as a law, a broken promise, a regulatory process, or a precedent. Thus, the concept entails both a tool that an Action Group can use to maximize its power on an issue, as well as a rationale that underscores the legitimacy of the campaign when the issue is framed.

I would submit that handles are the single most important variable in cutting and framing an issue. Success is contingent on the handles that can be employed as levers for social change. Below are a number of examples of the types of handles that Action Groups can use effectively. Since the leverage of handles is used to overcome resistance, most of the cases described will illustrate Social Action issue campaigns. It should be remembered that this is not a comprehensive list, but it is indicative of the kinds of categories that should be examined.

*Positive Incentives.* Community Development projects frequently utilize a wide variety of positive *internal* incentives to encourage people to get involved in a change effort. For instance, inducements such as food, music, awards, certificates of participation, tickets to an amusement park, or prizes might be handles to encourage youth to participate in a neighborhood cleanup. A community clinic might hold a health fair with similar attractions, as well as face painting for kids, a radio personality, and local entertainment. Positive incentives also might be utilized to help frame issues in “win-win” terms for *external* target systems. Judy Meredith’s “hero opportunity” concept again is relevant. The idea is that individual decision-makers can look good and gain a measure of credit by agreeing to help an Action Group meet its incentives. Thus, an elected official—especially one facing a strong challenger in an upcoming election—might act decisively to
meet a GCO’s request to open a new youth center or to sponsor an inclusionary zoning ordinance. While this phenomenon is inconsistent with my earlier discussion regarding the importance of GCOs receiving credit for their accomplishments, there will be times when the trade-off for support and ultimate success is worth the sacrifice.

**New Information.** A study or report releasing new information can put target systems in a vulnerable position and place them on the defensive. The data can be produced by a third party or by the GCO’s own research. On January 22, 2004, ACORN released “Speaking the Language of Care: Language Barriers to Hospital Access in America’s Cities,” a study documenting how non–English speakers are struggling to be understood at hospitals around the country. The research was gathered by Spanish-speaking ACORN members in Arizona, California, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., Florida, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia. Seventy hospitals were contacted by phone and fifteen more in person to determine whether Spanish-speaking staff were available as required by federal law (also a handle). In 56 percent of these contacts, no Spanish-speaking staff could be found. The health care implications for non–English speakers are obvious, and ACORN immediately began demanding meetings with hospital CEOs to insure that adequate plans for translation services were put in place all across the United States.

**Laws.** Many of the problems experienced by community members are a result of existing laws not being adequately enforced. The arenas can include environmental protection, public safety, immigrant rights, access to health care, predatory lending, redlining, insurance coverage, workplace conditions, wages, and fair and safe housing. Once the issues surface, it is simply a matter of doing the legal research to find what is required and then using this handle to require the proper authorities to enforce the law. Other laws, such as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or the Open Meeting Law, present handles that enable GCOs to gain access to information and to observe processes during which public policy decisions are made.

Frequently, grassroots community organizations will work for the passage of new legislation that will create enforcement handles once it’s in place. For instance, ACORN has waged campaigns in cities across the country to pass predatory lending ordinances, requiring that borrowers of high-cost loans receive counseling, that the loans provide them with reasonable and tangible net benefit, and that the loans be based on their ability to repay, and preventing the practice of “loan flipping.” These provisions create handles for future action in the event that the appropriate regulators fail to carry out their responsibilities. Similarly, Assembly Bill 647 in California provides renters with the means to force landlords to make needed repairs by enabling them to withhold rent and/or file suit without fear of being evicted.

**Legal Processes.** At times, a GCO may utilize the legal system as a handle to take further action. For instance, an organization might go to court to
win an injunction forcing a target system to obey the FOIA, block the operation of an illegal trash transfer station, or to protect the right of protesters to set up a picket line outside an institutional target. Generally, filing a lawsuit is a last resort (see McCreight, Chapter 7), but there are times when this tactic will be effective. ACORN brought a national class action lawsuit against Household International Inc. (now owned by HSBC Holdings) in 2002, which was settled in November 2003. The centerpiece of the settlement was a $72 million foreclosure avoidance program (FAP), providing relief to borrowers who are delinquent on their payments and at risk of losing their homes. Components of the program include interest rate reductions, waivers of unpaid late charges, deferral of accrued unpaid interest, and loan principal reductions. This campaign will be described in much greater detail in Chapter 5.

**Broken Promises.** When a promise is broken, an organization can frame the issue to create a handle that can provide strong moral justification and a leverage point for securing victory. The anger and indignation created by betrayals can energize the campaign and spur participation. The unfulfilled pledge offers a ready demand with a clear sense of winnability and justice. When the first President Bush embellished his promise not to cut taxes by instructing voters, “Read my lips,” he was creating a handle that the Democrats were only too happy to grab hold of in the following election. Bush was a one-term president. The governor who promises not to cut basic services as he or she slashes taxes for the wealthy will have “some ‘splainin’ to do.” And the mayor who pledges to establish an affordable housing trust fund had better follow through.

Thus, in September 2003, ACORN members rallied in twenty-two cities across the country protesting the second President Bush’s failure to fund Title I schools at the level promised in his “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.” The very title of this piece of legislation is a double-edged sword—creating hope and promise upon passage, but setting up expectations that a very real commitment has been made. When actions do not follow words, a powerful handle immediately appears.

**Contradictions.** Like broken promises, contradictions present a clear case of a disconnection between rhetoric and reality. When an Action Group frames its issues to publicize such gaps, it usually can operate from a point of “moral superiority,” which enables it to place the target in a defensive, if not indefensible, position. Generally, the media is quick to pick up on stories that depict contradictory behavior. When these circumstances exist, the GCO’s leverage will be quite strong.

The Ride Advocacy Project (RAP) offers a good example. Boston Self Help, a disability rights group, initiated this campaign to improve conditions for users of the “Ride,” a special program of the Massachusetts Bay Area Transportation Authority (MBTA). The premise behind this service is progressive and sensitive to the needs of disabled people. Special vans
give door-to-door transportation for disabled and elderly people who are unable to negotiate the physical rigors of riding MBTA buses and subway cars. However, there is a contradiction between the Ride’s official description and its actual operations. A number of profit-making companies contract to provide service for the Ride in various subareas of the MBTA’s jurisdiction. Regular users complain bitterly about calling to request service and being left to wait for several hours or never being picked up at all. At times, the van appears on the wrong corner after a long delay and then departs before the prospective user can put on a coat, get out the door, and reach the new rendezvous point. Users also frequently encounter rude drivers, dirty vans, and long waits for return rides back home. This contradictory situation has served to rally a determined Action Group to pressure the MBTA to make the Ride live up to the service described in the Authority’s public relations materials.

**Precedents.** Where a favorable precedent has been established, a GCO has a natural opportunity to apply pressure in order to achieve the same result. It is simply framing the argument as “If it’s been done before, it can be done again.” And when an Action Group interacts with the same target system that provided this positive example, the further case can be made that “you did it for them, now do it for us.” Where no precedent already exists, a GCO might create one. Often, this can be done quietly in a nonthreatening manner that will not be resisted; there even may be instances where it is best not to act in the name of the organization. Once having created a breakthrough, a solid organization can move full speed ahead to break things wide open. In other cases a more direct approach is better, but it should be remembered that most target systems will not willingly concede precedents that they believe will open up possibilities for replication.

The use of precedents lends itself well to campaigns targeting large bureaucracies. For instance, when mental health consumer/survivors win the right to shower in privacy and have doors on toilets in one psychiatric hospital, it’s much easier to push for similar policies in all facilities of the state mental health system. Communications within and between organizing networks make it possible to pass the word quickly about new issues, strategies, or tactics (e.g., witness the spread of successful Living Wage Campaigns by very different constellations of GCOs all across the United States). Precedents are especially useful for organizations with multiple chapters that can capitalize on one another’s victories, as demonstrated by ACORN’s work against predatory lending.

**Incidents.** A specific incident may provide the impetus that launches a full-fledged campaign. Often, such incidents or “horror stories” may be shocking or tragic, outraging people and provoking them to take action. Thus, when a small child is hit by a speeding car at a dangerous intersection, there generally will be an outpouring of emotion and an immediate effort to organize for a traffic light.
For instance, on January 15, 2004, a shooting death by local police in Orlando, Florida, sparked a public outcry. An unarmed and innocent African American man was shot and killed by a white police officer who previously had been investigated for racial profiling. Four days later, on Martin Luther King Day, over 300 community members attended a candlelight vigil organized by Orlando ACORN to protest police abuses and racial profiling. Petitions were gathered demanding an end to police abuses in the community, and, after considerable pressure, the Orange County (Florida) Sheriff’s Department finally agreed to ACORN’s demands that they collect and make available to the public race-related data on traffic stops and searches. As this book goes to press, ACORN members have scheduled another meeting with the sheriff to push for more community control on the Citizen’s Review Board and a better “early warning system” to identify and stop officers who abuse their power. The family of the victim also is filing a lawsuit against the police department.

Incidents can create handles, but they frequently put an organization in a reactive position. Nevertheless, the emotions engendered can energize large numbers of people. Direct action organizations should be ready to move quickly when a significant incident occurs, since anger and interest often will fade quickly. The GCO may need to set aside other plans and concentrate its full energies on the crisis at hand, although such decisions obviously should be weighed carefully. The group should avoid jumping from brush fire to brush fire without careful thought.

**Events.** Unlike incidents, events (as defined here) usually are scheduled and fairly predictable. They allow for more forethought and planning. Events provide handles because they occur at a fixed time and place where a GCO can gain access to and confront a target. Therefore, they present excellent opportunities for direct action. Often, they already will be covered by the media, providing a “news peg” (see Weltman, Chapter 7). Typical examples would include a corporation’s annual stockholder’s meeting, a speech or visit by a public official, the dedication of a new building, a special public hearing, or a political fundraising dinner. Such events enable GCOs to frame issues clearly, provide an arena for organizational action, and frequently offer very good opportunities for media coverage.

During the presidential election of 2000, George W. Bush and Al Gore held three face-to-face debates, one of which was in Boston. Health care costs had been a disputed topic during the campaign, and on the day of the debate, the Massachusetts Senior Action Council (MSAC) held a rally with more than 600 people at the Pfizer drug company. The action was designed to draw attention to the obscene profits of the pharmaceutical industry and to push for a new national Medicare program for seniors and disabled people. Predictably, the rally was coupled with the debate as the lead story on the evening news, and both candidates were questioned that evening about their plans to address the high drug costs experienced by sen-
iors. The debate had served as a handle for MSAC to generate momentum for its campaign for health care reform.

**Bureaucratic Regulations.** Bureaucratic regulations often allow great latitude in interpretation. At times, a strict interpretation may serve organizational interests, while frequently a broad definition may be more advantageous. Louis Lowy, a mentor and former colleague, always pointed out that bureaucrats operate in three arenas: what they must do in order to fulfill the basic requirements of their positions, what they must not do in order not to exceed their authority, and what they may do at their discretion. Handles can be found in all three areas. Housing inspectors must enforce the state sanitary code, and a GCO can use this handle to hold their feet to the fire, making sure that absentee slumlords properly are held accountable if they are not in compliance with the law. Police officers, teachers, immigration officials, and public housing personnel must not abuse the very real power that they hold, and if they do so, a GCO must be ready and able to utilize accountability handles to “tame” this misuse of authority. Discretionary judgments made by social workers, physicians, school personnel, nurses, fire inspectors, outreach workers, police officers, public health workers, and a range of municipal and state employees can have profound impacts on whether community members get access to health care, housing, education, safety, social services, benefits, employment, and training. The fact that these individuals can act consistently with the objectives of an Action Group provides a handle of possibility.

**Regulatory Processes.** Nursing homes, cable television companies, banks, transportation authorities, hospitals, public utilities, and insurance companies all are overseen by appointed or elected regulatory bodies. The respective regulatory processes often furnish valuable organizing handles for GCOs that seek to make these entities more accountable to community members. Legal interventions often enable a community group to gain access to financial records and operating reports. I’m reminded of a cable TV company that literally was keeping two sets of books—one to demonstrate financial strength and another to justify nonprofit status. Regulating bodies often routinely and quietly grant rate increases for public utilities with little input from the consumers who have to pay the bills. However, the regulations usually contain provisions for public hearings, and GCOs have publicized and politicized these processes by demanding and obtaining hearings held in the evening, so that large numbers of working people can attend.

During the spring of 2002, Rhode Island ACORN and allied groups blocked a proposed 13.9 percent increase in residential gas bills. Direct actions outside the regulatory process included demonstrations at the New England Gas Company’s downtown office and its president’s house, and payment of bills with pennies. Within the regulatory process, ACORN packed several public hearings and members gave extensive testimony on the hardships that the increase would bring for low- and moderate-income
people. Under the glare of public attention, the state Public Utilities Commission rejected the request for the increase and established new shutoff rules restoring gas service to all families paying 20 percent of their outstanding bills.

**Situations.** A wide variety of situations can give GCOs a handle on an issue. An upcoming election provides an opportunity to leverage more concessions from candidates who want to gain votes. Political contestants can be played off against one another in much the same manner that elected officials pit community groups against one another. In other instances, a scandal or embarrassing circumstance may make a company or individual more willing to deal. Thus, a national department store chain recently sued for its failure to promote women into management positions becomes a good target for a local community jobs campaign that includes demands specifying career ladder opportunities.

Similarly, conflict of interest situations give a GCO tremendous leverage vis-à-vis a target, such as a public official with a financial interest in a company doing business with the city. Various scams perpetrated on community members also may spark a campaign pressuring the appropriate authorities to rectify the situation. For instance, Minnesota ACORN has taken action to stop foreclosure rescue scams in which companies offer to buy back the homes of borrowers facing foreclosure and sell them back at a reasonable rate. In fact, these companies have rented the houses back on terms so steep that they quickly lead to evictions and families being left homeless.

A hazardous situation has led to a strong Social Action campaign by the Chelsea Green Space Committee. A private business has stored salt used to melt ice on New England highways in a mixed residential and industrial area where many Latino families make their home. In violation of state law, the 300,000-ton salt pile, which towers to the height of a five-story building, has been left uncovered and exposed to the elements as it leaches into the surrounding area. Trucks carrying the salt out to other cities and towns routinely spill large amounts as they traverse the city’s bumpy streets. This situation, which violates state law (another handle), has galvanized anger among community residents, who perceive it as a clear case of environmental racism. Both the company and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Affairs have been targeted by direct actions.

**Crisis.** When systems break down and a crisis develops, responsible officials immediately come under pressure to act. It’s no longer possible to ignore the situation or deny that a problem exists. Under such circumstances, GCOs have a powerful handle to advocate for constructive solutions. Currently, Baltimore ACORN members are taking action to prevent the layoff of more than 1,000 public school employees to balance the district’s budget. The positions that will be cut include systems curriculum specialists, facility staff, teachers, classroom aides, ESL personnel, and assistant principals. ACORN members had rallied at city hall
two days before Thanksgiving 2003 and presented the mayor with their second annual “Turkey of the Year Award” for his plan to balance the school district budget at the expense of Baltimore students’ education. In December, the group filed an injunction (handle) preventing the layoffs, and as this book goes to press is calling on school board members, the mayor, the city council, and state lawmakers to develop a plan for raising revenues rather than cutting critical educational support.

These categories should give the reader an idea of the variety of organizing handles that are available. Since it is always a goal to involve as many people as possible, not simply to win and solve the problem, the best handles will maximize participation and opportunities for collective action. Successful community organizing primarily is a function of strong relationships, trust, solidarity, hard work, vision, and attention to detail. But if there’s an element of genius in the process of social change, it’s the ability to find the handles of leverage where they aren’t readily apparent. Usually they are present in some form or fashion. It’s not a question of whether they exist, but rather a case of where and when we can find them.

These four factors—Action Group, goals and objectives, Target System, and handles—define the basic outline of a potential issue. When they have been established, the issue has been cut and framed. All four are interrelated and should not be considered separately or sequentially. Indeed, an issue can be cut and then framed by starting with any of these factors as a first given and then moving forward, integrating the others. Taken together, they determine the parameters of most of what is to follow.

**Conducting a Strategic Analysis: Opposition, Support, Objective Conditions, and SWOT Assessment**

A strategic analysis is a straightforward, practical way of examining the helping and hindering forces that will impact on any change effort. In the late 1940s, Kurt Lewin developed what he called a “Force Field Analysis” (FFA) to measure these factors. His methodology still is valuable for analyzing potential issues. On the left side of a piece of paper or chalkboard, make a column listing all the elements that will help bring about success on a particular issue. Examples would include factors such as handles, a favorable political climate, organizational leadership, and allies. Next, on the right side, list all the negative factors such as opponents, any history of unsuccessful efforts, and the GCO’s points of vulnerability. In the middle, list all the unknown elements, such as press and media coverage or the group’s ability to develop broad community support. Make sure to assess the level of agreement between the Target System and the Action Group. The more disagreement that exists between the two parties, the more likely that the Action Group will face resistance to the change effort from the Target System.

Once a complete and thorough listing has been made, a systematic
analysis of the positive, negative, and undetermined factors will give a good indication of the campaign’s chances for success. There are two ways to tip the balance in favor of victory—increasing the helping forces or decreasing the hindering forces. Positive forces can be beefed up directly by expanding the organization’s base of participation and resources or by enlarging its support network. Frequently, organizations and individuals in the middle “uncommitted” column can be targeted and converted to supporters, and, at times, interim strategies will be designed to do just that. The old union song, “Which Side Are You On?” captures the essence of the imperative to force neutral parties to take a stance on the issue, framing it as, “If you ain’t with us, you’re against us.” On the other hand, negative forces can be decreased by splitting the opposition and by neutralizing portions of it.

An FFA is an important strategic tool for any Action Group. However, it should be pointed out that this analysis only offers a snapshot of the forces at a fixed point in time. The process of social change is dynamic by definition. The FFA does not adequately account for the interactive effects of the various factors. A change in one element can impact all or some of the others, and many of the variables will be altered in the course of the issue campaign. It is often useful to redo or update the FFA periodically, making adjustments as appropriate.

Strategies should be developed based on an analysis of the likely resistance and clout necessary to win. Long ago, Roland Warren (1975) identified three major types of change strategies and the conditions under which each is most appropriate. Collaborative Strategies are effective when there is broad agreement between all parties on the goals and objectives of the change effort. For example, the tenants’ organization in a public housing development might work cooperatively with the housing authority management to help “market” the vacant units. In this case, a consensus would exist between tenants and management about the desirability of filling the empty apartments. A collaborative Community Development effort would make sense under these circumstances.

Persuasive Campaign Strategies are used when differences exist between the parties, but there is the potential for resolution and consensus. In these situations, a GCO attempts to convince a target to go along with its goals and objectives, at times using the leverage of various forms of pressure. Both positive and negative incentives can be used. For example, if the housing authority had plans to close and mothball a building with a large number of vacancies, the tenants’ organization might meet with various bureaucrats, planners, and officials. Arguments could be made to show why the closing of the building would be bad policy. The director of the housing authority might be given a tour of the development pointing out positive features such as community gardens, murals painted by youth, an arts and crafts program, an after-school tutorial class, and plans for an upcoming development-wide pride festival. He or she also might be taken
through the building with the vacant units, observe discarded syringes, see clear evidence of a “chop shop” for stolen cars, hear testimony from residents about gang activity in the empty space, and “get an earful” from community leaders passionately arguing for the need to rehab and fill the unoccupied apartments. The tenants’ group might use positive arguments and moderate threats to win over the housing authority until eventually a consensus was reached.

Finally, Contest Strategies are used when there are significant conflicting interests between the parties and little hope of achieving consensus. In these situations, a GCO tries to force a concession to its demands, regardless of whether agreement and consensus ever are reached. The target is not convinced; it is coerced. The agreement only is as stable as the GCO’s ability to maintain the pressure. For instance, if the housing authority was determined to close the building regardless of the wishes of the tenants, the stage would be set for a major battle. Tactics might include picketing, a media tour, face-to-face confrontations with top officials, sit-ins, rent withholding, or squatting in vacant units. Embarrassment, negative public opinion, and a disruption of business as usual would be used to force the authority to yield—even though officials still were not convinced that rehab was the best housing policy in this particular case.

These three general types of strategies are a function of the degree of disagreement between the parties on an issue. A strategic analysis examines these differences by studying the forces of resistance. This should give a clearer sense of where an effective strategy might fall on a collaborative to confrontational continuum. **The greater the shift in power relationships being sought, the more resistance the Action Group is apt to meet.** Based on this analysis, appropriate strategic approaches should be developed consistent with the Ten Tools for Taking Power: self-help; persuasive arguments; raising consciousness; using existing laws, policies, and processes; changing laws, policies, and processes; publicity; electoral power; affecting appointments; consumer power; and disruption.

Obviously, the mechanics of a strategic analysis are quite simple. Most people usually do weigh some of the pluses and minuses before undertaking any change effort. All that the strategic analysis does is to formalize and systematize the process so that most, if not all, of the factors—rather than just a few—can be studied carefully. The depth of the analysis is what really counts. Assumptions should not be made quickly or superficially; nothing should be taken for granted. Most important, the various factors should be viewed dynamically, rather than statically. Action and change are the goal, not simply an analysis of the status quo for the sake of analysis. Too often, when done by academicians, such studies lead to explanations and rationalizations for why no change is possible. Organizers and leaders must avoid such “analysis paralysis” and concentrate on how action can alter the various forces to achieve success.
Several additional factors should be examined as part of any strategic analysis: **Opposition, Support, and Objective Conditions**, followed by a final **SWOT Assessment (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats)** of the Action Group. Analysis of these elements, in conjunction with the process of cutting and framing the issue, should give a reasonably accurate picture of the level of organizational action and clout necessary to achieve success. Whether done formally or more informally, time should be set aside for this additional strategic analysis before an **Action Plan** is developed. It answers the basic questions: Who’s against you? Who’s with you? What’s beyond your control? What are the pluses and minuses for your action group?

**Opposition.** It’s critical to have as much thorough knowledge as possible about the opposition to any change effort. As always, good research will be key. The best place to start is with a study of both the breadth and depth of opposition. It’s essential to identify who the opposition likely will be and how important the issue will be to them. As with the GCO’s own base of support, opposition can be widespread but shallow, narrow but deep, or the other two combinations of these variables. What is being analyzed is **who will oppose you and how hard they will fight you.**

Just as perceptions of self-interest will determine participation and support, so too will they give rise to opposition. There’s nothing complicated or mystical about identifying likely opponents. As the old Native American saying goes, if you simply “put yourself in the other person’s moccasins,” you can get some sense of how he or she sees the world, what he or she hopes to gain and fears losing, where he or she hopes to go, and how he or she plans to get there. Combining this type of insight with an opponent’s statements about the issue at hand, her or his past actions under similar circumstances, and intelligence gathered from other sources allows a fairly accurate prediction to be made.

An examination of the history of any past organizing effort on the issue will be instructive. For instance, an unsuccessful attempt to win a graduated state income tax five years earlier may have met with stiff resistance from business associations, antitax groups, certain media outlets, and various elected officials. A lot can be learned about arguments used against this reform and the leading sources of opposition simply by reading through old news clippings and talking with former activists on the issue. How was the issue framed by both sides? Was the “loss of jobs” refrain used by opponents? Where did organized labor come down on the issue? How much comparison was made with states that already have such taxes in place? If the issue went down to defeat on the ballot, what can be learned from voter opinion polls before and on election day? The same or similar opponents and arguments against this proposal are likely to emerge a second time around. What will make this latest effort different enough to succeed at this time?

Perceptions about self-interest usually will be as important as ideology.
Too often, support or opposition is assumed superficially based on a
person’s (or organization’s) ideological proclivities, rather than on a close ex-
amination of their self-interest. Clearly, this especially should be kept in
mind when dealing with politicians, most of whom frequently will trade
their positions on an issue for votes. This basic principle is true in most
instances. Allies and opponents will shift from issue to issue and situation
to situation. A careful analysis of self-interest should be combined with an
examination of ideology to predict behavior.

In addition to the breadth of opposition, it’s necessary to determine how
intense the various sources of resistance will be. Opponents will view an
issue differentially and may act accordingly. It’s important to know
whether an opponent differs mildly or views the issue as a critical, bitter
struggle to the end. The personal characteristics of the various individu-
als also will vary widely, with some fighting an issue strictly on the merits
and not holding a grudge, and others attempting to destroy the organiza-
tion out of vindictiveness or just on general principles.

These factors, plus others described in the section “Cutting and Fram-
ing the Issue,” will determine the specific targets for the campaign. Part of
the Action Group’s strategy should be to split the opposition and isolate
the targets from their possible allies. A good understanding of the various
players’ differential investment in the issue will make a more effective
strategy. Positive or negative pressure frequently can be brought to bear
on various members of the opposition, thereby neutralizing them, or in
some cases converting them to supporters. This is the age-old principle of
“divide and conquer.”

Thus, ACORN’s classic Lifeline campaign in Little Rock proposed a rate
structure carefully designed to benefit all but the 178 major industries and
corporations. The effect was to isolate the large rich corporate interests,
normalize small businesses, and win firm support from everyone else. In
the bitter election, ACORN won forty of sixty precincts, losing only in the
rich fifth ward. In the previous twenty-five years, no citywide election had
been won without carrying that ward.

Any analysis of the strength of the opposition also should examine the
resources they have at their command. Money, personnel, equipment, po-
itical contacts, and access to the media are but some of the types of re-
sources that can be marshaled in opposition to the GCO’s campaign. The
effectiveness of such resources should be analyzed along with the Action
Group’s ability to counter them successfully. An opponent’s greatest
strength often may be the source of its greatest weakness. In many cases,
the seemingly overwhelming superiority of the opposition’s resources can
be used to tactical advantage—as when a grassroots community organiza-
tion is able to portray a campaign as a “David versus Goliath” struggle be-
tween the forces of “good and evil.” It’s important to think proactively and
aggressively, turning organizational minuses into pluses.
Ultimately, success or failure will hinge on the ability to exploit the opposition’s points of vulnerability. Here the analysis overlaps considerably with the search for organizing handles as previously discussed; broken promises, contradictions, scandals, and conflicts of interest all will expose the opposition. It’s important to find out what they need—money, staff, resources, clientele, credit, or legitimacy—and what they hope to accomplish, such as making a profit, service delivery, organizational expansion, setting social policy, personal advancement, or political gain. The GCO draws its power from its ability to affect these factors positively or negatively. An analysis that simply focuses on the opposition’s strengths will provide little or no tools for victory. Almost by definition, grassroots community organizations will be taking on powerful, well-organized adversaries. These opponents should be studied in great detail and challenged where and when they are most vulnerable. Every opponent will have at least one Achilles’ heel; the Action Group needs to find it, frame the issue accordingly, and target it for action.

**Support.** A strategic analysis needs to assess the Action Group’s potential for generating broad community support, as well as specific allies where needed. General support often will be a function of whether the GCO can establish a position of “moral superiority,” framing the campaign so that its goals are seen as legitimate and just, and its opponents are portrayed as “heavies” acting unfairly and without good cause. In most instances, the opponents will be attempting to do much the same thing, justifying their own position and discrediting the organizational campaign. The contesting parties will put forth competing issue frames characterizing the situation. Haggstrom (1971) used the analogy of a “morality play” with the actors trying to win support from the public audience.

Often the press and media will play an important role in defining the terms and dynamics of these conflicts. Thus, GCOs should take great care to establish and maintain credibility with the press, paying particular attention to the quality and accuracy of the research that is used publicly. Where possible, the target’s own figures should be used, or widely recognized sources that can be defended easily. The battle to establish moral superiority will be critical, and good press relations may be an important factor (see Weltman, Chapter 7). Support from the general public always will be difficult to predict, but how the press and media describe the issue and the relevant actors will be a key determinant, so issue framing should be done carefully and strategically.

The organizing handles will provide much of the legitimization for the Action Group’s position. Whether they be laws, regulations, or processes that prescribe the rules for fair play; or incidents, crises, and hazardous situations that justify organizational action, handles offer more than leverage points against an opponent. They also help explain why the Action Group is “right” and its opponents are “wrong.” They lend credibility to
and a rationale for the GCO’s position while simultaneously challenging the arguments of the opposition. Indeed, public opinion and general support very well may turn on the strength of these handles and the ability of the group’s leaders to articulate them.

Of course, GCOs also may seek specific allies in addition to more general public support. Allies can offer a range of benefits from symbolic endorsements, to tangible resources and tasks, to actual participants. In some cases, endorsements from powerful organizations such as labor councils or official church bodies will carry significant legitimization and clout. In other instances, individuals working in large bureaucracies such as the welfare or mental health departments quietly can feed invaluable inside information to GCOs that confront these agencies. Obviously, such allies must be protected with care; only top leaders and staff need to know their names.

At other times, an organization may seek resources such as a meeting space, use of equipment, buses for transportation, and the loan of staff or even money from a better equipped and financed ally. Or the ally may be able to perform a number of valuable tasks, such as helping with door-knocking, making phone calls, providing childcare, or assisting with transportation and logistics. Finally, an ally may furnish significant numbers of its own members to participate in actions and other campaign activities.

As previously discussed, allies may come from seemingly unlikely sources. The old saying “Politics makes strange bedfellows” certainly applies to the world of grassroots community organizing. Individuals, institutions, and organizations that may differ with the GCO on other issues may have a common self-interest in the issue at hand; it’s important not to dismiss such potential supporters prematurely. Like opponents, they can be identified by analyzing what they need and what they hope to accomplish. The most effective approach in one case won’t work in another. In some instances, appeals to common goals, values, and the necessity for unity will be sufficient. In other situations, descriptions of organizational self-interest should be mixed skillfully with calls for solidarity. An alliance on an issue does not necessitate an ongoing close relationship, and once the campaign is over, the parties may go their separate ways.

In addition to examining the potential for possible alliances, the strategic analysis also should assess the reliability and effectiveness of any future supporters. More than one organization has been burned by undependable allies. The damage may be particularly severe when a friendly organization fails to deliver on a promise to send large numbers of members to an action or large meeting. To the extent that success may depend on these promises, the ally will be a liability rather than an asset. Thus, while the old “strange bedfellows” adage may be true, it still makes sense to check out potential allies carefully before jumping into bed with them.
At times, GCOs may enter coalitions with other organizations to develop greater leverage. By “coalition,” I mean a formal alliance (usually temporary) that creates a structured relationship between two or more organizations. As discussed in Chapter 3, there are many reasons for joining a coalition (see also Mizrahi, and Rosenthal and Sampson, in Chapter 7). When organizations pool their numbers and resources, they may increase their collective clout beyond the sum of their separate parts. The coalition creates a united front that enhances the legitimacy of the campaign and helps prevent opponents from playing one group off against another. Such structures help spread the risks of the campaign while expanding and coordinating the use of resources. The combined effort focuses the strength of the various member organizations on a single campaign, thereby reducing fragmentation, duplication of effort, and lack of communication.

But there also are organizational costs when a coalition is joined. Power and decision making must be shared with other members, and compromises will be necessary. Often, decisions will be made around the most common denominators for the various parties, with some of the more innovative or militant tactics being dropped in favor of actions that stay in the comfort zone for all members. In fact, there seems to be a correlation between the broadness of a coalition and the blandness of its positions and actions.

The decision-making process also raises a host of other questions. Structural problems may arise when large membership organizations combine with smaller ones or with social service agencies and institutions. Individual activists who join the coalition complicate things even further. If disagreements occur—and they usually do—policies must be made concerning representation and voting powers. Situations where each participant has an equal vote may prove unsatisfactory to the large membership organizations, particularly when they disagree with a decision and feel underrepresented. On the other hand, setting guidelines for proportional representation may prove to be a very difficult task, especially when the various members of the coalition have widely different ways of defining membership or size. These differences should be worked out internally, behind the scenes, and not be allowed to spill into the public arena where opponents can capitalize on them. There should be an honest acknowledgment of organizational self-interest and a good-faith effort by all parties to incorporate this into procedural and structural ground rules.

Before entering a coalition, a GCO should have a good sense of whether the other participants are solid, reliable groups that can move significant numbers of people into action. The ultimate source of organizational power is large numbers of people willing to take collective action. Endorsements, names on a letterhead, and other forms of “paper” coalitions
do little to tip the balance in a major campaign. And merely linking together an assortment of weak organizations with no real active membership base does not generate more power. There is no shortcut for building a solid base.

Whether it be in a formal coalition, with the help of solid allies, or simply by seeking a sympathetic response from the general public, most GCOs will attempt to establish a broader base of support for their actions. A strategic analysis should gauge the possibilities for generating such support in its various forms. This is an area that requires sophisticated analysis and pragmatic planning.

**Objective Conditions.** Factors that are beyond the action group’s control may have a major impact on whether a campaign is successful. These objective conditions both create opportunities and limit possibilities for social change. A strategic analysis should focus careful attention on such factors and assess the positive and negative elements. While little or nothing actually can be done to change these conditions, advantages can be maximized and liabilities minimized if there’s a solid understanding of them. If ignored or misunderstood, objective conditions may jeopardize success.

Campaigns to bring about social change do not take place in a vacuum, regardless of the type, level, or scale of action. The economy, the political climate, current events, history, laws and policies, social attitudes, and a variety of other factors combine to create the sociopolitical context in which the campaign is waged. At times, these factors create opportunities, as when the political climate or current events favor change, while in other cases they present obstacles, as when social attitudes and economic cutbacks make success unlikely.

Beyond these large sweeping contextual conditions, very specific factors beyond the action group’s control also have a dramatic impact on prospects for success. For instance, possible handles such as elections, budget surpluses, fiscal crises, scandals, and tragic incidents exist beyond the independent volition of any GCO. At a different level, both predictable and unanticipated phenomena, such as a blizzard, flu epidemic, Christmas holidays, school vacation, legislative calendar, or the local team playing in the World Series, may affect the timing of a campaign.

Leaders and organizers should be sensitive to all these types of objective conditions and carefully study the ones that can be foreseen. Once again, recent history can be instructive. Do the conditions still exist that contributed to success or failure in the past? What has changed? What can be done differently this time? Equally important, what in the present or near future presents new opportunities or obstacles to organizational action? It’s important to read the newspapers, talk with knowledgeable people, and be aware of significant changes and developments. Events and phenomena should be looked at from the angle of how they affect organizational goals and strategies. This broad awareness and understanding
of the context within which campaigns take place increase the probability of success. To ignore these factors is to risk almost certain failure.

**SWOT Assessment.** Having gathered and analyzed all this strategic information, the Action Group is positioned to do an assessment of its own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) in relation to this particular issue campaign. The tried and true SWOT Assessment examines positive and negative factors as does a Force Field Analysis, but a SWOT has a particular focus on the upsides and downsides for the action group itself.

*Strengths* and *weaknesses* can be assessed by examining previously discussed factors, such as the number of participants who can be activated, the quality and quantity of leadership for this effort, staffing and volunteers available, the effectiveness of internal and external communication systems, and the adequacy of organizational resources. *Opportunities* also were discussed above in the section on *Organizational Mileage*. Beyond obtaining an important victory for community members, they include possibilities for furthering long-and middle-range goals, building unity, achieving organizational growth, educating members and leaders, utilizing new strategies and tactics, receiving credit and credibility, developing allies, and expanding resources.

*Threats* relate to the opposition’s ability to act on vulnerable points; they can take a variety of forms. Certainly, one source of concern will be the ways in which opponents can intimidate GCO members or even retaliate against them. Obviously, community members who fear reprisals are less likely to participate in collective action. Tenants terrified of evictions by their landlords, workers believing that union activity will result in firings, immigrants afraid of deportation, and neighbors who quake before the power of the mayor’s political machine are not likely to organize. The GCO must take steps to protect its members and assuage their fears. There also may be threats to organizational funding, the danger of alienating allies or the general public, the prospect of burnout and low morale if the campaign is lost, or even the possibility of arrests, personal attacks on leaders, and concern for personal safety. The Action Group needs to be aware of its own areas of vulnerability and develop plans to overcome or offset them.

A careful strategic analysis of *opposition, support,* and *objective conditions,* followed by a SWOT Assessment, should give a clearer picture of the kind of campaign necessary to achieve a victory. Generally, *the greater the degree of change being sought, the more resistance that will be encountered.* This is true because large-scale changes entail an increased redistribution of power away from “haves” to “have-nots” and (possibly) the “have-a-littles” who are in the middle. Those in the middle will be torn between “wanting more” and “holding on to what they already have.” Their *hopes for gains* will need to outweigh their *fears of losses,* or else they won’t participate. This dynamic will be crucial when cutting and framing the issue.
GCOs that take on major issues seeking significant changes also will have difficulty generating power beyond their own highest level of organization. Thus, a strong neighborhood group may have great influence over issues and decisions within its own turf boundaries, but may be relatively powerless to affect policies made at the citywide level. Similarly, a solid citywide GCO may have little impact on statewide policy, while a powerful statewide organization probably will not wield national clout.

This is not to say that GCOs never will have power beyond the level at which they are organized. Under the right circumstances, a combination of factors may enable an organization to exert disproportionate leverage. For instance, a citywide group with a strong base in the home district of a key U.S. representative may have some ability to influence the drafting of various bills in Congress. Or a neighborhood group organized in an area where a busy commuter tunnel is located may be able to leverage significant concessions from the city by blocking traffic. A good strategy will capitalize on any such conditions and factors that give a GCO a unique advantage, and careful analysis may uncover a surprising number of possibilities.

In still other instances, it is necessary to localize national or statewide campaigns in order to make them relevant and participatory for organizational chapters at the city or neighborhood level. A large-scale national or statewide campaign should arrange for people to plug in at the local level. Too often, such campaigns attempt to move people directly into action at the higher levels without first involving them locally. When this happens, most people usually feel a lack of ownership of the issue and the rate of participation suffers markedly. Often, such campaigns never really get off the ground, or deteriorate into efforts by a small, committed group of leaders with no significant base of support. By finding local handles and targets, the organization will be able to provide a mechanism for people to participate in their own cities and neighborhoods.

Certainly, there are many factors to weigh and variables to consider when choosing issues and developing strategies. But the Action Group should be careful not to analyze and strategize to the point where it’s unable to catalyze change. It’s impossible to figure out every single possibility. There’s a time to act and that’s a fact!
POTENTIAL ISSUES: ORGANIZATIONAL MILEAGE
CONSIDERATIONS

Consistency. Is the issue consistent with the long-and middle-range goals of the organization?

Unity. Will the issue be unifying or divisive?

Capacity. What is the GCO’s capacity to undertake this issue campaign at the present time?

Growth. Will the campaign help the GCO grow?

Education. Will the campaign provide a good educational experience for leaders and members, developing their consciousness, independence, and skills?

Credit. Will the GCO receive credit for a victory on the issue, improve its credibility, and increase its overall visibility?

Resources. How will the campaign affect organizational resources?

Allies. Will the campaign develop new allies and/or enemies?

Tactics. Will the campaign emphasize collective action, producing new strategies, tactics, or issues?

Victory. Will the campaign produce a significant victory?
CUTTING AND FRAMING ISSUES

WHO
 Members
 Leaders
 Staff
 Structure

WHAT
 Long-Range Goals
 Middle-Range Goals
 Objectives

WHOM
 Direct Targets
 Indirect Targets

HOW
 Strategies
 Handles
 Tactics
 Allies
 Resources
 Communications
STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

Force Field Analysis
Assesses All Helping and Hindering Forces.
Determines Degree of Target System Disagreement and Likely Resistance.

Formulate Strategy
When Target System Agrees, Use Collaborative Strategy.
When Target System Disagrees, but Agreement Is Possible, Use Persuasive Strategy.
When Target System and Action Group Have Conflicting Interests, Use Contest Strategy.
Use Combination of Strategies as Appropriate.

Develop Strategic Approaches
“Ten Tools for Taking Power”—Self-Help; Persuasive Arguments; Raising Consciousness; Using Existing Laws, Policies, and Processes; Changing Laws, Policies and Processes; Publicity; Electoral Power; Affecting Appointments; Consumer Power; Disruption

Opposition
Who is against you?

Support
Who is with you?

Objective Conditions
What is beyond your control?

SWOT
Strengths of the Action Group
Weaknesses of the Action Group
Opportunities for the Action Group
Threats to the Action Group
HANDLES CHECKLIST

Positive Incentives
New Information
Laws
Legal Processes
Broken Promises
Contradictions
Precedents
Incidents
Events
Bureaucratic Regulations
Regulatory Processes
Situations
Crises
Look for Other Handles
Chapter 5

“Moving into Action”
Making and Carrying Out Action Plans

George Wiley, the founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization, summed up the essence of organizing as follows: “You make a winning plan and you make it happen.” An Action Plan outlines a step-by-step campaign to implement a strategy to achieve organizational goals and objectives. “Actions” are organized mobilizations of community members to carry out some aspect of the plan. The term usually is associated with Social Action, utilizing various tactics to pressure one or more targets to meet specific demands. A broad conceptualization would include Community Development gatherings to take collective action to clean up a vacant lot, create a community garden, paint a mural, launch a neighborhood crime watch, or renovate a youth center. However, most of the material in this chapter is geared for Social Action campaigns in which community members and external targets initially do not share a consensus about goals, objectives, or even methods for resolving points of disagreement. The Action Plan outlines a series of steps the GCO will take in order to convince or coerce targets to change attitudes, decisions, plans, behaviors, and activities.

Once the issue is cut, framed, and strategically analyzed, it’s time to make an Action Plan. Now, there are four major tasks: selecting appropriate tactics, preparing for possible opposition countertactics, defining a timetable, and making plans for recruitment, preparation, and assessment.

**TACTICS**

Tactics activate the latent leverage of strategies, tools, and handles by bringing a degree of pressure to bear on the Action Group’s target(s). They are what community members actually do to exercise their collective power vis-à-vis
whomever they seek to influence. Tactics are the component parts, which
together constitute a plan of action.

The GCO should choose from a range of tactical options consistent
with the collaborative, campaign, or contest strategies that it’s employing.
A variety of tactics can be employed during a single action. For example,
a group might hold a rally to generate opposition to a hazardous waste
dump, march as a group from the rally to city hall, sit in at the mayor’s
office, and refuse to leave until he or she agrees to negotiate, all within a
single action.

There literally are scores of tactics that action groups can use. A few
examples in ascending order of militancy are research studies, letters,
phone calls, petitions, public testimony, accountability sessions, tours,
vigils, marches, awards, picket lines, boycotts, blockages of access, meet-
ing takeovers, fasts, rent strikes, and sit-ins. The greater the degree of re-
sistance from the target, the more likely that adversarial strategies and
tactics will be appropriate.

Sound tactical decisions depend on a working knowledge of some basic
guidelines and principles. For Social Action purposes, it is difficult to im-
prove on the tenets described by Saul Alinsky in his book *Rules for Radicals*
(1972; I have added explanatory language in a few instances).

• Power isn’t only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have.
• Never go outside the experience of your people. This will produce confu-
sion, fear, a collapse of communication, and a lack of ownership of the
tactic. Keep things simple and logical.
• Wherever possible, go outside of the experience of the enemy. Keep them
off balance by doing the unexpected. Don’t become predictable in your
actions.
• Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.
• Ridicule is one of our most important weapons.
• A good tactic is one that your people enjoy. Have fun!
• A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.
• Keep the pressure on with a variety of tactics and actions.
• The threat can be more terrifying than the thing itself.
• The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will
maintain a constant pressure on the opposition. The pressure produces
a reaction from the target, setting the stage for further organizational ac-
tion and subsequent oppositional reaction.
• If you push a negative hard and deep enough, it will break through to its
counterside. The real action is in the enemy’s reaction. The enemy, pro-
perly goaded and guided in its reaction, will be your major strength.
• The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative. Be prepared to offer an organizational solution to the issue if called upon.
• Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.
• Tactics, like organization and like life, require that you move with the action. Be flexible and imaginative. Have contingency plans for a variety of responses by the opposition.

While these Social Action principles still are valid, the opposition faced by many GCOs has become more sophisticated over the years. Public and private institutional decision-makers have learned how to deal with many of the “standard” direct-action techniques. It is critical that new tactics be developed along with the momentum to make them work. Tactics such as squatting, street blocking, citizen’s arrests, tearing down abandoned houses, pledges, subpoenaing opponents, creative use of e-mail and the Internet, “people’s hearings,” buying mainstream advertising, “billing” the city for services done by the organization, and a host of dramatic props now are regular features of the direct action repertoire of many GCOs. Yet, these ideas only scratch the surface. There’s a crying need to create and execute imaginative new tactics in all types of organizing being done at the present. This problem doesn’t receive sufficient attention and becomes more serious with each passing day.

At times, the sources of leverage will be indirect, and tactics will be designed to win public support and sympathy for the action group’s position. Protest tactics will seek to embarrass opponents and establish the GCO’s position of moral superiority. Tours, marches, demonstrations, vigils, and informational picketing may be used to generate the pressure of public opinion against the opposition. For example, a group might invite the media on a visit to a slumlord’s properties, ending at the owner’s home, where leaflets would be distributed to neighbors with a message along these lines: “Did you know that your neighbor, Mr. X, is a slumlord?”

While the target may have to contend with the immediacy of a group of demonstrators on the front lawn, the action actually poses little direct threat beyond its ability to make him or her uncomfortable. On the other hand, negative publicity is bad for business and can cause embarrassment with friends, neighbors, associates, and customers. The specter of an unfavorable story on the evening news may pose a considerable threat. In this case, while the tactics may involve a high level of direct action by GCO members, the most direct source of leverage is one step removed and lies with the general public or some particular third-party “audience.”

When campaigns lean heavily on the force of public opinion, a separate media plan should be developed. The media generally will be the vehicle that carries the Action Group’s story to the general public. In order to establish and hold a position of moral superiority, it is necessary to document
charges against opponents as responsible and credible with solid research and good background materials. The media plan will include preparing fact sheets, position papers, and press releases, and making contacts with key reporters (see Weltman, Chapter 7). Leaders for the issue campaign should be designated as media spokespeople and prepared for this role. The Action Group will need to take care that only these selected representatives articulate the official issue frame and organizational position to the media. Otherwise, there is a real danger of sending out unclear or mixed messages.

Other strategies and tactics rely less on the mobilization of public support and instead attempt to have a direct impact on the target. Militant adversarial tactics such as strikes, withholding payments, sit-ins, shop-ins, or blocking traffic seek to disrupt business as usual. There is no real attempt to “win over” the target to a shared consensus; rather, pressure is applied until the target “gives in” and makes a concession to “go along” with the action group’s demands. There may be an attempt to gain public sympathy, but while third-party support is desirable, it isn’t essential in these types of campaigns. For instance, a community group that is upset about the closing of a neighborhood fire station might decide to block commuter traffic on a busy nearby thoroughfare. The tactic is certain to anger the commuters and prompt a flood of calls to the local radio talk shows, the thrust of which will be, “If that group thinks they’re winning supporters and sympathy for their cause by blocking innocent commuters, they’re crazy. They’re their own worst enemies.”

In fact, the Action Group’s strategy is one of direct disruption and does not depend on public support at all. The mayor and various city officials are the target, and the GCO’s source of leverage is its ability to create a traffic crisis. While the commuters may be angry with the demonstrators, they also will look to the mayor to solve the problem. Ultimately, the mayor will have to deal with the organization—one way or another—in order to regain control of the traffic situation. Of course, the lack of public sympathy may make it easier for the mayor to deal harshly with the demonstrators, but that is part of the calculated risk of using such a tactic. In the final analysis, the success of direct disruption comes down to the GCO’s ability to mobilize significant numbers of people who truly are angry and feel justified in using militant nonviolent tactics. With a combination of group solidarity, large numbers, and a strong leverage point against the target, these tactics can work without the benefit of broad public support.

Strategic and tactical decisions should be made with a clear understanding of the organization’s direct and indirect sources of leverage and power. Thus, a powerful union such as the Teamsters can call and win a trucker’s strike, even though the tactic may be highly unpopular with the general public. If the trucks don’t move, especially during the winter, there’s a dramatic impact on the delivery of food and other essential prod-
ucts all across the country. There’s a crisis that affects the welfare of large segments of the population. With such direct leverage, an organization does not have to be overly concerned about winning public sympathy. On the other hand, if a union of public assistance social workers calls a strike, the people most directly impacted will be low-income clients who don’t wield a lot of political clout. Compared with the Teamsters, the social workers have far less direct leverage. Without a strategy and tactics appealing to third-party support, their prospects for success also will be much more limited.

GCOs should analyze the sources of their power carefully, maintaining consistency when choosing their tactics. Militant tactics that alienate large segments of the population should not be combined in the same campaign with appeals to the general public that hinge on the Action Group’s ability to establish a position of moral superiority. It’s not that either approach is wrong; however, they may be mutually exclusive. Weak tactics such as writing letters or submitting petitions usually will prove ineffective. But strong tactics require a solid organizational consensus and capability. The tactics should fit the campaign at hand and must be consistent, appropriate, and effective.

While the sources of leverage may vary, the organization’s ultimate strength and power lie with the numbers of people it can mobilize for action. Regardless of whether it is through direct disruption, the ability to swing public opinion against an opponent, or a combination of the two, power will flow from the collective actions taken by the GCO’s own membership. The Action Plan should involve as many people directly in the campaign as possible. This will maximize the organization’s power and give those participants an opportunity to experience their own collective strength through direct action. Tactics should be both fun and educational for leaders and members, going outside the experience of the opposition and keeping them in a reactive position.

COUNTERTACTICS AND THE SEVEN D’S OF DEFENSE

When engaging in Social Action, it’s important for an Action Group to anticipate and prepare for the probable responses of its targets. A strong offense in an organizing campaign requires the ability to counter any defense that an adversary might employ. Human nature being what it is, there always will be surprises when parties with competing interests interact. Nevertheless, much of human behavior does fall into fairly predictable patterns, and action groups increase the chances for success when they develop plans that account for possible moves by opponents. Just like a winning chess player, it is essential to think several moves ahead of the opponent.
Social Action entails an element of competition, and there is often a struggle over which side is able to be proactive and which is in a reactive position. Needless to say, those who are proactive have the most control of the dynamics of the engagement and are in a better position to win.

I have grouped some of the most familiar countertactics into several general categories that I call “The Seven D’s of Defense”: Deflecting, Delaying, Deceiving, Dividing, Denying, Discrediting, and Destroying. Obviously, there are more than seven countertactics that opponents may employ. And they don’t necessarily begin with the letter “D.” So, this list should be treated as illustrative rather than exhaustive. There is also no one correct response for each, but I will suggest some proven remedies. When an Action Group is primed and ready to counteract these familiar countertactics, it is better able to stay proactive in the pursuit of its goals and objectives.

**Deflecting**

Many times, targets will try deflecting the thrust of an organizing campaign or action by attempting to refocus it in another direction. Common tactics include sending an assistant or “flunky” to deal with the Action Group, “passing the buck” to another department, trying to change the subject or switch issues, and attempting to change the forum for the decision—as when the mayor directs the group to seek redress from the city council or the state legislature. Targets are trying to deflect responsibility away from themselves when they employ this classic behavior.

Good research can help overcome many of these countertactics, particularly by determining from the outset that the target does have the power to make the necessary decisions. When organizational leaders have an understanding of the decision-making process and the key people involved, it is more difficult for opponents to “pass the buck” or change the forum. The leadership can fix responsibility with the appropriate people and lock them in for a response. Once the primary targets have been established and “frozen,” flunkies can and should be dismissed, simply by forcing them to admit that they have no decision-making power. An organization never should deal with such people. By doing so, it “tips its hand” to an unempowered subordinate who cannot deliver on the Action Group’s demands, but who will pick their brains and carry this information back to the primary target.

Of course, this may be easier said than done. It’s one thing to make a plan to deal with an adversary and quite another to execute it, firmly holding the target accountable. Carrying out such a plan requires a combination of assertiveness, skill, and persistence. Only by meeting beforehand and preparing thoroughly will the Action Group’s leaders be able to respond effectively to any tactic the opposition tries. A preaction planning meeting provides an opportunity for leaders to choose tactical options, make contingency plans, and practice their assigned roles. Engaging in
role-playing and other kinds of rehearsals helps primary leaders anticipate and deal with a variety of opponent’s responses.

Depending on the type of action, several devices may help force the target to give clearer answers to the demands. A written pledge can focus pressure on the opponent and heat up a confrontation as members begin chanting, “Sign the pledge; sign it now.” Similarly, a poster listing the demands followed by “yes” and “no” boxes to record the responses can keep the action clearly focused on the target and the issues. A written “memorandum of agreement” (MOA) also can work well. Once the target has made a public agreement, the potential handle of a “broken promise” will be in place in case of slippage and backtracking.

**Delaying**

The stall is a common tactic that can be frustrating and demoralizing to those who have to contend with it. It’s particularly exasperating when the opponent strings together a series of fairly plausible excuses. Timing plays an essential part in most direct-action campaigns, and a loss of momentum often can be fatal. Opponents may use delaying tactics to slow the pace of a campaign, in order to “ride out the storm” of protest. This especially is true when they believe that an organizational action is a singular, one-shot mobilization that will subside with the passage of time.

In other instances, they may be attempting to buy additional time to develop a more effective counterstrategy. Or, they may be testing the Action Group’s resolve, trying to wear down its energies. Whatever the adversary’s motive, the effects on the issue campaign can be devastating. Excitement and momentum will be lost if the GCO is not able to force the target to take action. Frequently, this can cause internal problems as members channel their anger and frustration inward. In virtually all cases, people eventually will feel outmaneuvered and demoralized by an opponent who draws out the campaign ad infinitum.

Fortunately, there are steps that an organization can take to deal with delaying tactics. Whenever a target is unwilling to respond immediately to demands, a deadline should be set for an answer. When setting a deadline, the group needs to balance reasonableness with the necessity for prompt action. There will be times when the opponent really does need more time to make a good faith response, and a demand for immediate action will be a tactical error. Targets may request more time to study the situation, or they may claim that they lack the resources for quick action. Prior research will help the Action Group to assess the validity of these excuses. Leaders must be able to differentiate between legitimate postponements and unnecessary delays; deadlines should be set accordingly.

Of course, a deadline is meaningless without the threat of serious consequences for the adversary if it isn’t met. There should be a credible and
ominous “or else” attached to any deadline. Since the implementation of such a tactic requires the mobilization of people and resources, the timing of the deadline is important. There’s a need to maintain the campaign’s momentum without putting undue strain on the organization to come back with another action before it’s ready. The action should give the target a clearer sense that the GCO will not fade away quietly—that delaying in bad faith only will exacerbate the situation and prolong the inevitable.

There are two other approaches to consider in responding to delaying tactics. One is to define demands in incremental terms, forcing the target to concede promptly to some initial demand that provides a victory and continued campaign momentum. For example, if your campaign aims at expanding a fuel assistance program, a first, winnable demand might be that the target should accept mass applications, rather than insisting on individual intake appointments. A second approach is to hit indirect secondary targets who may not have the authority to meet your central demands but who can put pressure on the primary target. For instance, when city bureaucrats drag their feet, you might appeal to an elected council member to investigate the situation.

**Deceiving**

Disingenuous targets may stoop to deceiving the Action Group whenever they think they can get away with such behavior. This category covers a range of tactics from tricks and subterfuges to outright lies. Here, the opponent’s goal is to mislead leaders and members, producing a false sense that action is being taken on their demands. This type of delusion is designed to relieve organizational pressure on the target, either permanently or until another countertactic can be employed. The deception may take a variety of forms and can be difficult to combat. In many cases, the target will attempt to bewilder and perplex members through a sea of “red tape” that makes the processes unintelligible. An array of bureaucratic rules and regulations are invoked. Simple solutions suddenly become impossible to implement. The computer can’t be programmed to institute the action group’s proposals. Legal issues emerge out of the blue.

These deliberate attempts to deceive can pose difficult problems. If outside experts or lawyers are needed to cut through technical excuses, be careful that these professionals do not lose sight of their limited consultant role. The Action Group’s leaders and members must carry the fight to the opposition, not legal counsel. Every effort should be made to transfer information and knowledge to the leadership, so they can make the arguments directly. Most technical information can be translated into lay terms. Once versed with this knowledge, leaders should be able to clarify and simplify the problems, eliminating complexity as a viable countertactic.
A different type of deception occurs when opponents try to confuse leaders with a significant change in style, exhibiting a friendly, concerned manner and feigning sympathy for the group’s demands. This may be particularly effective when the adversary is powerful, has a nasty reputation, and has taken a hardline attitude in the past. Expecting the worst, leaders may be caught off guard by a cordial greeting, offers of coffee and donuts, and a generally harmonious atmosphere. Of course, the target’s courtesy, concern, and respect may be genuine; the danger lies in the possible confusion of form versus substance. The bottom-line test of the opponent’s good faith is agreement or disagreement to take action on the demands. A smile and a “no” are little different from a frown and a “no,” except the smile will be even worse if it obscures the denial.

Some of the tactics mentioned above—such as pledges, scorecards, and MOAs—help focus the action and smoke out the target. These graphic reminders of the “business at hand” keep the agenda on track, ensuring that the target can’t slip away without responding. They also provide a good record of the answers. Indeed, getting written documentation or a recording of responses by the news media is the best defense against the lie. While opponents may equivocate or go back on their word, concrete evidence of the truth will be in place, generating outrage and moral superiority. With such a tactical edge, the GCO should be able to mount an intensified campaign against any opponent who is blatantly untruthful.

Another deceptive tactic, which may occur later in a campaign, is the sometimes subtle change of a negotiating session into an informational meeting. In this scenario, various aides trot out flowcharts and other materials designed to explain why the demands can’t be met, and a quasi-lecture ensues. If leaders are not careful, they quickly can lose control of the situation and fall into a passive mode of operating. The key is to regain command of the session, limit the time for any presentation, and remind the target(s) of the consequences of further inaction. Again, role-playing in the planning meeting will help leaders distinguish between stylistic pleasantries and substantive negotiations, and prepare them to respond accordingly.

Dividing

Perhaps the most insidious type of countertactic is the old standard, “Divide and conquer.” If an organization’s power lies in the strength of its numbers, then anything that splits and separates its members and leaders will weaken it. That, precisely, is the goal of divide and conquer tactics. The target attempts to create discord and dissension within the organization or between it and other GCOs, thereby diminishing its ability to wage an effective campaign. Counteracting such tactics can be especially difficult, since they create the kinds of divisions that make consensus difficult,
if not impossible, to achieve. Thus, there may be disagreement as to whether a tactical dilemma even exists, let alone how to overcome it.

One of the most effective ways adversaries can divide a group is by winning over a few key leaders. Often, they appeal to people who are the most moderate, offering token or symbolic concessions. In some cases, the agreements are contingent on the group abandoning certain militant tactics. Of course, the purpose of the GCO’s strategy is to force concessions, but when the divide and conquer tactic is used, the offer to deal with the action group’s demands isn’t made in good faith. Rather, the opponent tries to induce leaders to drop an effective tactic prematurely, before offering anything significant in return. This type of deception may not work with the entire group, but by making overtures to leaders who are not comfortable with militancy, the target sometimes can create enough internal chaos to upset the group solidarity.

The best antidote is a careful examination and analysis by the leadership of the proposed “concession.” The question at issue should not be the organization’s tactics, but rather the nature and quality of the target’s offer. There should be a reassertion of the campaign’s goals and objectives, a determination of whether this proposal is a substantial step forward, and then, if appropriate, a reexamination of the Action Group’s tactics. The key is to return to the areas of consensus, reestablish them, and then move to any discussion of differences. When such disagreements break out in public during the course of an action, the group should caucus immediately in private so that differences can be worked out and a united front can be presented to the target.

In another version of the divide and conquer tactic, the adversary may attempt to “buy off” or co-opt some of the stronger leaders by meeting their personal needs. The hope is that those leaders, having met their own needs, then will “sell out” the rest of the Action Group. Attempts to co-opt leaders can be dealt with by a combination of solid preparation and ongoing discussion and analysis as the campaign progresses. By laying out the possibilities for co-optation ahead of time, there is an opportunity to prepare everyone to be watchful for the first signs of such tactics. This will make it more difficult for opponents to fool people with token offers. And top leaders will be more hesitant to sell out, knowing that other members and second-line leaders are aware of the possibilities.

Sometimes, divide and conquer tactics will be geared more toward causing internal dissension than converting or seducing various segments of the leadership. Opponents will attempt to create schisms within the organization by raising issues, subjects, and solutions designed to pit one faction against another. Here again, the best defense will be preparation that anticipates the likely use of such tactics. In a practice session, someone should play the part of the target and make a concerted effort to raise points that are likely to divide the group. Often, these potential divisions
are predictable along race, ethnic, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, homeowner-tenant, newcomer status, disabilities, political parties, and other sociocultural “fault lines.” By working through some of these issues privately beforehand, the leadership will be able to present a united front when the issues arise publicly.

At other times, potential external divisions between the Action Group and other GCOs may be the challenge. Frequently, when coalitions or alliances approach a target, offers of concessions may be made that appeal deeply to the interests of several groups, while other organizational members remain dissatisfied. The danger exists that some groups will want to “settle,” while others will be committed to continuing the campaign until their own interests are met. Cooperation between the participating GCOs may be based on quid pro quo tradeoffs, whereby organizational members agree to support one another’s objectives and demands in return for backing on their own priorities. Opponents usually will be quick to identify likely fissure lines based on differential organizational interests. Divide and conquer proposals are very apt to follow. The best antidote will be a reaffirmation of the principles of solidarity that brought the groups together in the first place. If there are multiple objectives, they should be prioritized; and “bottom-line” guidelines for acceptable agreements on demands should be established.

In all cases, there is a basic preventive measure that can stymie “divide and conquer tactics,” namely, a clear system of internal accountability. The Action Group, not the opponent, should have tight control over who has the right to speak for and to negotiate for its members.

One other divisive tactic that adversaries often use is verbal attacks on the organizers, attempting to isolate them from the rest of the organization. Clearly, organizers will play a key role in preparing leaders for actions and helping them offset some of the countertactics discussed herein. This fact usually will not be lost on opponents who become infuriated by such “agitators,” whom they see as “stirring people up.” This situation only is exacerbated when the organizer plays a visible, aggressive role during the action. Predictably, targets will pounce on staff members if this is the case, especially those who are “outsiders.” There may be attempts to “red bait” organizers or to goad them into inappropriate overreactions that offend the GCO’s members. These tactics usually are coupled with appeals to the action group’s leadership to purge themselves of such “troublemakers.” The key to dealing with this tactic is not to allow the organizer to become the focal point of debate. These attacks can be minimized or prevented if organizers adhere to their proper roles. The organizer who gets too far out front and begins to play a leadership role simultaneously undermines organizational development and becomes vulnerable to attack. This should be avoided.

Nevertheless, there will be times when staff members are singled out, regardless of their behavior. When this does happen, the organizer should
not rise to the bait, but should look to the organization’s leaders to take up the fight. If he or she has functioned properly, leaders usually become highly insulted by the suggestion that they can be manipulated, controlled, or led astray by staff members. Under these circumstances, this countertactic can backfire in the opponent’s face, adding to the anger and determination of the leadership.

**Denying**

Whenever a target flatly is denying its demands, an Action Group must be ready, willing, and able to escalate its tactics and bring more pressure to bear. There really are not a lot of tricky options in this situation. If demands are denied, the organization is left with the choices of giving up, changing the demands, or finding ways to generate more leverage on the target. Accordingly, several options for more militant tactics should be held in reserve. Then, if it becomes necessary to increase the pressure, it will be possible to do so.

An opponent’s refusal to meet organizational demands may take many forms. One of the most basic countertactics is simply making oneself unavailable—being “too busy” or “not in,” or declining to meet. Escalating tactics might include taking more dramatic action, such as a picket, march, vigil, loud chanting, meeting takeover, blockade, or sit-in; going over the target’s head to the next person in the bureaucratic chain of command; or confronting the original adversary in other places and arenas—home, church, club, golf course, board meeting, or social or political event. The goal of these actions is to force a meeting with the target.

In other instances, there may be a face-to-face confrontation with the target that results in a denial of the Action Group’s demands. Target responses might range from the hardline stonewalling tactic, “Just say no,” to a variety of excuses, such as “I’d like to help you but . . . my hands are tied, we just don’t have the money.” The hardline approach may take the form of denying the problem even exists, minimizing it, or simply refusing to deal with it. Regardless, by failing to meet the Action Group’s demands, opponents essentially are calling its bluff, challenging it to take further action if it can. Escalation is the preferable response, unless there are compelling reasons for a “strategic retreat” or a reframing of objectives and demands.

Good research can be helpful when excuses for inaction are offered; sometimes such defenses can be discredited totally by well-documented facts and figures. A solid justification for the demands, plus the denial itself, can help legitimize the Action Group’s decision to move into more militant tactics. Oftentimes, members are reluctant to employ tough tactics, until they’ve given the target a chance to respond to polite requests. Once their moderate and reasonable approaches are denied, there’s a natural progression to an increasingly militant stance.
Discrediting and Destroying

On some occasions, opponents will go on the offensive, using more aggressive tactics to strike back at the organization. They may attack both the organization and individual leaders or members, attempt to destroy the Action Group’s credibility, frighten its constituents, or threaten its very existence. When these kinds of tactics are used against it, a GCO will find itself in an intense struggle with increasingly high stakes.

At one end of the spectrum are *discrediting* tactics aimed at the organization or its campaign. Often, this will involve accusations and recriminations made through the media. There may be challenges to the validity of the group’s facts and figures, claims that it really doesn’t represent a significant portion of the affected constituency, efforts to play other groups off against it, charges that its tactics are irresponsible, intimations that its leadership is corrupt, or a basic denunciation of its purposes and goals. These are counteroffensives aimed at winning over public opinion by attacking the organization’s mandate, methods, morality, and motives.

The GCO, in turn, can take a number of steps to overcome efforts to discredit its campaigns. Obviously, its facts and figures should be accurate. Challenges can be expected, especially when the information is damning. *The best defense will rest on solid research methodology and a good media strategy to carry your message to the general public.* Claims that the Action Group is not broadly representative of the affected constituency can be put to rest by *mobilizing large numbers* of people to take direct action.

Basic condemnations of the organization’s tactics and goals should be met by establishing a strong position of *moral superiority.* The cultivation of respected allies is a valuable asset. For instance, in the ACORN squatters’ campaign, a minister usually was enlisted to help tear the boards off the abandoned houses. And, rather than trying to downplay the militancy of the tactic, ACORN members have readily acknowledged that squatting is illegal, but countered by asserting that letting houses sit empty is immoral. The moral argument dilutes the opponent’s denunciation of the tactic. Solid reputable allies also can vouch for the integrity of the GCO’s leadership.

When a competitive dynamic is created with another group, there needs to be some analysis of whether the two groups can join forces on a common agenda or whether a struggle is in order. Of course, opponents would prefer to deal with a weak, less militant organization whenever possible. Indeed, under certain circumstances, they even may *create their own group* along the lines of a “company union” or a public housing task force handpicked by the housing authority. Ineffectual, unrepresentative organizations should be exposed as such whenever brought in by the opposition. On the other hand, solid groups with a broad and active membership base should be dealt with seriously. It will be in neither group’s long-range interest to be played off against the other.
In the final analysis, the organization’s greatest defense will lie in the number of people actively involved in the campaign and the track record of legitimacy it has established over time.

At the other end of the spectrum are tactics designed to threaten or intimidate individual members and leaders, and actions capable of disrupting, destabilizing, or even destroying the organization. Individuals may be threatened with or actually encounter evictions, loss of jobs, arrests, deportation, physical violence, or other forms of harassment. Organizations may face various legal actions, efforts to cut off their funds, surveillance, destruction of property, and, in some cases, infiltration by informants and agents provocateurs. Clearly, such tactics pose a significant threat to members, leaders, and the GCO itself.

An organization has to protect the people who participate in it. While there’s a natural element of risk for any individual who takes part in a militant direct-action campaign, the GCO has both a moral obligation and a self-interest reason for defending its members. Whether through legal action or direct action, the entire Action Group has to rally with all its force behind any member who is threatened or attacked. Similarly, this kind of solidarity is essential when the organization itself comes under attack. A combination of strong allies, solid legal assistance, a stepped-up media campaign, and aggressive direct action can add up to an effective counteroffensive.

While such threats can and should be fought fiercely, there is also a danger in becoming so absorbed in defensive strategies that the organization loses sight of its original objectives. If the arena for action shifts from the streets to the courtroom, the opposition will have accomplished its purpose. Remember, when you take the letter “d” away from the word “danger,” you’re left with “anger.” The opponent who tries to intimidate a GCO and its members risks making lots of people very mad. And people with collective angers can transform themselves into effective changers.

When dealing with the range of defensive countertactics likely to be encountered, there are several fundamental elements to an effective response. Most important are anticipation and preparation, making contingency plans, and rehearsing their implementation. Being ready to move quickly allows the organization to preserve the action-reaction dynamic that works to its advantage.

Internal discipline, cohesion, and accountability always are critical. They must be built into the entire organizing process, not pieced together in a frenzy when the going gets rough. The ability to escalate in numbers and tactics is a GCO’s most significant source of leverage, and the capacity to mobilize outside sources of legitimization can make the difference between success and failure. With all these factors on your side, the odds are good that you will succeed in forcing the target to drop “The Seven D’s of Defense” and begin dealing with your demands.
Timing is another key element of a successful Action Plan, especially when organizational targets are resistant. Whoever controls the timetable in such a campaign is able to wield a tremendous advantage by maintaining a proactive position. Just like a baseball pitcher, an Action Group needs to keep the opposition off balance by doing the unpredictable whenever possible. The idea is to strike when the target is most vulnerable and the group is at peak strength. As the campaign progresses, maximum turnout at direct actions should coincide with the GCO’s need for greatest leverage. Skillful timing can enable the organization to establish an action-reaction dynamic, keeping the opposition uncertain and increasing the level of active participation.

While some campaigns may feature a one-shot action delivered at a key point in time (putting all the eggs in one basket), most will involve a number of actions that unfold over a period of time. Obviously, each action must be able to stand alone on its own goals and objectives, yet it also must be consistent with the overall campaign. There should be increasing pressure on the opposition to concede outright to the organizational demands or to move to negotiations. Knowing when to negotiate and when to hold off is another key timing question for any group. Clearly, the guiding principle is to bargain from a position of organizational strength and oppositional weakness. (This and other aspects of the negotiating process are examined in depth in “Negotiations: Using a Weapon as a Way Out” by Mark Splain in Chapter 7.)

Part of the trick is to control the tempo and flow of the action, forcing targets to play the Action Group’s game. Picture two runners—a sprinter and a marathoner—arguing about who is “faster.” There is little question that the sprinter will win a short race and the marathoner a long one. When setting up a competition to resolve the debate, each party will try to set the distance according to her or his advantage. Social Action campaigns work the same way. Opponents will attempt to define the issues and scope of the action in ways most favorable to their own interests and preferred manner of operating. They can be expected to apply a number of counteractactics like the ones discussed above to try to seize control of the campaign, forcing the Action Group to play by “their rules.” It is critical that the group remain in a proactive position from which it can keep the pressure on the target and control the flow of the action.

Certainly the element of surprise is a critical factor. By doing the unexpected and unpredictable, an Action Group establishes two advantages. First, this makes it difficult for targets to anticipate the group’s next move, limiting their ability to plan a counterstrategy. Secondly, unforeseen surprise tactics place those targets in a reactive position, narrowing their
options for a response. As their alternatives for action become more limited, their behavior also becomes more predictable. This enables the Action Group to plan strategic and tactical options several moves ahead. The idea is to position targets so that meeting the GCO’s demands becomes their “best” option. They are left with “an offer they can’t refuse.”

The campaign should escalate the pressure on the target as time progresses. It’s dangerous to peak too soon. The largest, most militant actions should be saved for last or when a victory clearly is possible. Big turnouts that cannot be repeated should not be “wasted” on actions that generate minimal leverage. Once the opponent has been hit with the Action Group’s full force, he or she probably will be more alienated than convinced of the correctness of the group’s position. Winning a victory will depend on whether he or she believes the same thing—or worse—can happen again. Generally, it’s fear of potential damage that forces the opponent to make concessions, not reaction to prior actions. While surprise is critical for success, the group also has to maintain a credible threat of further, more severe consequences for targets who refuse its demands.

Furthermore, it may be necessary to go through a series of steps before members and leaders feel it’s appropriate to escalate into more direct action. Certainly, organizers or leaders should not impose their own ideas about tactics on an unprepared or unwilling membership. People may feel it is unfair to demonstrate at a landlord’s house without first giving him a chance to come to a meeting with tenants. However, following the landlord’s refusal to attend such a meeting or complete rejection of the group’s demands, community members may feel it’s appropriate to escalate the tactics and take the “meeting” to his front doorstep. Similarly, more than one Action Group that has voted not to sit in as a tactic has done just that after being confronted by a rude, heavy-handed decision-maker who has insulted their intelligence.

When conducting adversarial campaigns, actions are designed either to win a clear-cut victory or to draw the lines for further engagement. When the Action Group’s demands are denied, community members want to move into more militant action. There’s nothing like a tough battle with a nasty opponent to alleviate uncertainty about more aggressive tactics. At all costs, the Action Group needs to avoid ill-defined, “mushy” situations where it’s unclear whether or not a victory has been achieved. It is important to control the schedule, developing a timetable with definitive check points to assess the campaign’s status.

Often there’s a need to win incremental victories as the campaign unfolds. Subdemands that can be won along the way help sustain momentum while laying the groundwork for an ultimate victory. For instance, a GCO that is opposing a proposal to raise natural gas rates might start the campaign by demanding a public hearing in the evening, so that working people could attend. The struggle over this demand would build group
solidarity, and the nighttime hearing subsequently would provide an ideal opportunity for more direct action. In the same manner, the first step in a jobs campaign may be to force the city to accept the group filing of applications. A property tax fight may begin with an action to obtain a list of large corporate and slumlord delinquents. Surprise actions on key banks, such as the GCO demanding investment data, may kick off an antiredlining effort. And a group of public housing tenants may begin an extermination campaign by forcing official recognition from the housing authority. In each case, an incremental victory would build momentum, while providing more leverage for the ultimate demands.

Campaigns with timetables broken into distinct phases are more manageable to run and easier for leaders to control. Victories can be defined optimally or minimally along a continuum. A “win” can result from a target’s agreement to do something, stop doing something, alter what its doing, report back, give information, give recognition, or recommend something to a higher authority. Both the goals and the targets may change with the different stages of the campaign, making victory possible at a number of levels.

A Multiphase Action Plan

The Boston Chapter of M-POWER conducted a campaign for Informed Consent (IC) within the Massachusetts mental health system that offers a good example.* The organization of mental health consumers/survivors/ex-patients developed a successful multiphase Action Plan to force the state Department of Mental Health (DMH) to enforce the law and implement this policy requiring doctors “to disclose certain types of information to a patient before undertaking a diagnostic, therapeutic, or research procedure.” Patients who are injured by any such procedure have the right to collect damages from doctors who violate the tenets of Informed Consent, even when those procedures are performed properly. The Action Group operated with a very precise definition of IC as “information about the risks, benefits, or possible side effects of any given treatment; alternative treatment choices available; and the probable consequences of no treatment. This information is to be given in a setting where the consumer/survivor feels free to accept or reject the proposed treatment.”

Many M-POWER members had experienced serious adverse effects either from medication or electroconvulsive therapy, including fatigue, memory loss, excessive weight gain, tics, and tardive dyskinesia—permanent brain damage resulting in involuntary movements. They complained about psychiatrists who did not provide adequate information or dialogue about their interventions, and often felt coerced into taking various treatments.

*This example draws directly from Thogersen (2003).
“Cutting and framing the issue” was quite straightforward, because it was broadly and deeply felt, it was immediate to the members’ personal experience, and the remedy was specific. There also was a clear sense that a solution was winnable, since that would entail enforcement of an existing law—an excellent handle. DMH was targeted, since the bureaucracy was responsible for implementing the law. Six demands were established:

1. The law of Informed Consent must be observed, enforced, and implemented properly.
2. Each consumer verbally must be given the name of their medication; the benefits, side effects, and risks; and the reason for taking or not taking the medication.
3. A document must be signed by the consumer and the doctor stating that the consumer has received the information and will or will not give consent to taking the medication.
4. A fact sheet about the medication being prescribed must be available and must be given to the consumer.
5. A memo must be distributed to all DMH physicians stating that the above proposals now are established policy and procedure. This memo is to be posted, visibly, in all state hospitals, community mental health centers, and physicians’ offices funded by the DMH. The memo will be worded in both English and Spanish.
6. A human rights officer will be available within 24–48 hours to talk with consumers in regard to informed consent.

The list of demands first was presented to the DMH Deputy Commissioner. Meetings with other officials followed to work through details that M-POWER wanted included in the memo. All meetings with DMH personnel were preceded by planning and rehearsal sessions. Debriefings followed each interaction. Written records carefully documented all statements and agreements made by the various officials. After numerous heated confrontations and protracted negotiations, the Deputy Commissioner finally issued a memo committing the DMH to follow the law, completing the first phase of the campaign.

However, the memo had passed on responsibility for developing implementation plans to the six Area Directors. To no one’s surprise, six very different implementation plans were submitted. A task force composed of DMH personnel was proposed. M-POWER took it upon itself to draft their own plan incorporating elements from the six preliminary plans, and then demanded three seats on the task force. Several actions followed, culminating with a major confrontation where allied consumer/survivor groups turned out in large numbers. The DMH agreed to include three task force members chosen by M-POWER. Rallies featuring songs, chants,
and dramatic props frequently were held immediately prior to task force meetings. After a year of constant pressure, M-POWER emerged from the task force with a document signed by the new DMH Commissioner containing every word that they desired.

Incremental successes may serve as a means to final victory or an end in themselves. It is critical to maintain momentum and to escalate the pressure on the target as necessary. Ideally, campaigns will not exceed six to eight weeks. Longer ones, like the one described above, definitely should be broken into distinct phases with clear goals and subdemands. Results should be visible and tangible for all involved. Most importantly, the actions should be fun and give people a sense of their collective power.

A mixture of objective conditions may limit an Action Group’s ability to control the campaign’s timetable. Hearing dates or elections already may be set, targets may control the first move, or unknown factors may intervene to change the order of things. It is critical to make a tight Action Plan. One of the most basic techniques is counting backwards from a fixed date on the calendar. Where the key dates already are set, this process is straightforward. Given the predetermined amount of time available, the campaign needs to incorporate an Action Plan that has realistic expectations for moving large numbers of people into action, while maximizing the pressure on the target. There needs to be ample time to do the organizational work of recruitment and leadership planning. Large turnout events must be spread apart (generally about a week) to allow people to participate at what they consider to be a reasonable pace.

Any Action Plan should build in options for the group to withdraw from the campaign at various points. If such a retreat is necessary, it’s important to be able to define the conditions of “escape” in a way that minimizes the organization’s loss of face. Nothing is worse than the campaign that lasts indefinitely with no resolution. This can destroy morale and sap valuable organizational resources. Better to have possibilities at various points for ending the campaign, cutting losses in the process. Breaking the timetable into clear stages builds in opportunities for the group to end the campaign when it wins enough to quit or simply runs out of gas.

The campaign’s timetable must fit into the overall organizational plan. In summary, the Action Plan itself should be designed to retain proactive control over the campaign’s rough schedule of events, keeping tactics unpredictable and delivering them at points of peak organizational leverage and target vulnerability. Any plan should recognize the basic principle that power flows from numbers. Organizational development and success on the issue both require that targets be confronted directly in large participatory actions. To do this, the Action Plan should have a realistic timetable for its objectives and must avoid an overly ambitious turnout schedule that large numbers of people cannot meet.
RECRUITMENT, PREPARATION, AND ASSESSMENT

The final elements of any good Action Plan include designs for a systematic recruitment drive and meetings to prepare for and debrief after all major mobilizations during the course of the campaign. The best tactical decisions and the most carefully planned timetable are useless without a large Action Group to carry them out. And careful planning is essential before all actions, followed by assessment sessions to evaluate the results and to begin preparing for next steps in the campaign.

Recruitment

Earlier, I discussed the importance of analyzing the breadth and depth of the issue’s self-interest draw, and suggested some recruitment techniques. Each issue campaign requires its own specific recruitment plan. Clearly, face-to-face contact is the most effective way of building a large turnout, but a group is limited by the time and resources it can bring to this task. Any recruitment plan must take such limitations into account. However, many GCOs take unnecessary shortcuts on recruitment, either out of ignorance, lack of effort, or a preoccupation with winning a specific reform at the expense of building a power base.

A common error is skipping the important preliminary steps that can be used to build participation and increase people’s sense of ownership of the issue. One basic principle is that the greatest percentage of people will attend a meeting held near where they live or work. Therefore, campaigns that ultimately seek to target someone at the federal, state, or citywide level should be localized whenever possible, so that large meaningful meetings and actions can be held in the community members’ neighborhoods or close to their workplaces, when that’s the organizing arena. Certainly, a lack of time or scarce organizational resources can prevent the optimum number of these local meetings and actions from being held. However, too frequently these types of events simply are overlooked or felt to be unnecessary. This results in a failure to organize a strong local base and the loss of organizational mileage, with many people never participating in the campaign and experiencing the victory as their own. Later, when resistance is met at a higher level, there will not be sufficient numbers of involved community members to win through direct action.

For instance, tenant leaders from twenty-five individual public housing developments might decide to wage a citywide campaign for better extermination, targeting the director of the housing authority. The citywide focus would make perfect sense, maximizing the efficiency of action and the collective power of tenants, while limiting the authority’s ability to use divide and conquer tactics against the different developments. Yet, it would
be a tactical error for tenant leaders to move from an initial planning meeting to an immediate citywide confrontation with the director. By first holding local meetings in each development (and doorknocking for a large turnout), many more residents could be involved and feel themselves to be a part of the campaign, increasing their sense of ownership.

Certainly a much larger number of people would move from these initial meetings to a citywide action than if they were invited directly to a distant and unfamiliar setting. And the leaders from each development would have an opportunity to gain experience and a greater sense of ownership by being responsible for a meeting in their own area. Obviously, such a scenario would provide more roles for more people, ideally recruiting new leaders as well as rank-and-file participants. It would be important to make sure that such local meetings had meaningful agendas, perhaps moving through the authority’s hierarchy by initially targeting the local manager. However, the need and the reason for attending the upcoming citywide action also would be emphasized in these meetings. Local leaders could help boost that turnout by making a strong pitch at the meeting, getting commitments in the group setting, and securing pledges on a sign-up sheet.

The long-range possibilities for increased organizational mileage and development of a tenant power base should be clear. Just as important, if the director refused the group’s demands, substantial numbers of leaders and participants absolutely would be necessary for any successful direct-action strategy on this issue. Too often, the initial steps that can be used to increase community involvement are passed over in a rush to “solve the problem.” This has the result of transforming a potential “recruitment” issue into a “maintenance” campaign, losing both mileage and leverage in the process. Such a strategic sacrifice occasionally must be made, but only when the timetable or a lack of resources to do the work absolutely demands it.

Occasionally, if there’s a sudden emergency, mobilizing techniques such as passing flyers or making public announcements about meetings or actions will produce large numbers of people. For instance, when a small child has just been struck by a speeding car at a dangerous intersection or when there’s been a clear incident of police brutality in the neighborhood, people may turn out for action based on a very minimal level of contact. This type of crisis mobilization can be carried out with a minimum of recruitment and often will mobilize large numbers of very angry people.

Despite the difficulties of control and organizational discipline that this poses for the leadership, such actions are important challenges and opportunities for victory. If the people are ready to move, the GCO should be able to focus their energy and anger on the appropriate target, overcoming traditional structural fears in the process. As Piven and Cloward pointed out in *Poor People’s Movements* (1977), conservative organizational concerns too frequently impede direct-action possibilities. This danger
cannot be overemphasized. There must be an ability to recognize, and a will to pursue, opportunities for militant direct-action strategies when they arise.

Nevertheless, in most cases, solid organizational work will be necessary. The opportunities for crisis organizing are relatively rare. Generally, three basic methods of face-to-face contact can be used—doorknocking/home visits/one-on-ones, housemeetings, and speaking to “captive” audiences, such as church groups, senior citizen lunches, or union meetings. Door-knocking and housemeetings proceed using the same principles described in Chapter 3. Normally, a greater quantity of people can be reached through doorknocking and visits, while the quality of discussion and commitments made during housemeetings will be superior. The captive audience technique has the advantage of a minimum time commitment for contact with a maximum number of people, but here the speaker is intruding on another meeting, frequently in the face of primary loyalty to another activity. Therefore, the quality of the commitments given may be limited, although the efficiency of the contact process still may produce a good number of people. And when there’s enough available time, recruiters can follow up by visiting the folks who sign up, engaging in deeper, more extensive discussion in the process.

In all three cases, written commitments should be secured on a sign-up sheet (as distinguished from a petition) to underscore the promise to attend and to gain the phone number for a follow-up reminder call. Recognizing the normal human tendency for people to avoid setting a precedent, such sign-up sheets never should be blank; leaders can eliminate this difficulty by signing at the top of the page. Similarly, in situations where recruitment is done before a group of people, every effort should be made to secure several key commitments before the meeting, so that the new recruits can demonstrate their promise to attend in front of the whole group, inspiring others in the process.

It is also critical to prepare people for the possible consequences of any confrontation. All too often, unrealistic fantasies and fears prevent community members from getting involved. They may have visions of being beaten or arrested by police, attacked by opponents, or embarrassed in front of friends. Usually these worries are exaggerated or unfounded. Both leaders and members need to be prepared for what is likely to happen. Clearly, the recruiter must be honest about any risks that do exist, while also putting to rest any unrealistic fears.

A brief description of the likely scenario will help, along with questions that probe for any reservations the listener may have. Nothing beats a frank discussion about what is likely to happen at the action. Any precedents should be cited, anger should be drawn out, humor employed, and pride appealed to. A little role-playing also may help dispel some of the fears. People who accept responsibility for doing some task or playing a role will be more likely to attend. Obviously, no one should be coerced or
tricked into participating, but the recruiter should be able to make a compelling case to attend. This means being able to deal squarely with both the advantages and the consequences of collective action.

Once basic recruitment has been done, it’s important to be able to make a reasonable prediction of attendance at particular actions. In some cases, the size of the crowd directly will affect the kinds of tactics the action group will employ. When estimating numbers, the same principles outlined in Chapter 3 should be applied. Unless anger and interest are so high that mobilizing techniques are possible, only definite “yes” answers should be counted, with a smaller percentage of this number considered firm. That percentage will vary with the intensity of feeling about the particular issue. Community members’ own history with a GCO also will be a determinant of whether they turn out for meetings and actions. There is no precise formula, but with experience, a leader or organizer should be able to make a fairly accurate prediction.

These estimates also may be helpful when dealing with the press. Too often, grassroots community organizations inflate their predictions in order to attract press coverage. This strategy often boomerangs, especially when people from the press feel duped into covering an event by crowd projections that clearly are false. The best guideline is to “lowball” all predictions for the press and then attempt to maximize the recorded total at the actual event, emphasizing the larger than expected turnout. Reporters seldom count heads precisely and often are open to modestly inflated figures. Dealing with the press generally is not a one-shot affair. An organization should establish some basic level of credibility and reliability for its predictions. There usually will be other issues and other actions; it makes no sense to alienate the press by attempting to deceive them and possibly destroying the GCO’s credibility in the process.

**Preparation**

A balance must be struck between a participatory planning process and the need for the action group to remain proactive throughout the issue campaign. The quick pace of Social Action requires the capacity to act swiftly to seize tactical advantages and the flexibility to respond to new circumstances. Generally, a core of eight to twelve leaders provides the ideal number to do this. Yet, it is critical that these leaders represent the views of the larger group. Planning is essential before all types of meetings and actions are undertaken. And the leadership team should present its action proposals to the larger group for endorsement or change. Within the leadership group, tasks should be divided as much as tactically advisable, providing responsibility and experience for some of the newer people. The process of determining strategies and tactics should be participatory, while the actions themselves should maximize full community involvement.
Once there is agreement on the first action, some basic research is in order. When a face-to-face interaction with a target is sought, *accessibility* becomes key. Ideally, the target will agree to attend a meeting or event scheduled by the Action Group on its own turf. Community members typically will be more comfortable and confident when they have a “home field advantage” that helps them retain a proactive position. Dates, times, and meeting places will need to be set that maximize potential community member attendance and make it possible to get a firm commitment from the target to appear. Determining where the target lives also would be important for Action Groups prepared to make a “home visit” as a contingency plan for targets who fail to show.

But, very often, targets will insist on meeting at their office—or, even more commonly, refuse to meet at all. Then it becomes essential to determine their schedules, the exact location of their offices, and the best routes for buses to travel to get there. John Beam (1984) covered a number of excellent logistical points in the following excerpt from “Actions from Start to Finish,” which appeared in the first edition of this book:

Where is the parking? Where should the buses unload? If you’re planning a march, where are the one-way streets? (You’ll tie up more traffic if people march down a one-way street with the traffic behind them.) Where are the doors? Do they open in or out? Are they easily locked by them or us? Where are the stairwells? The elevators? How many do they hold? (Always take the stairs, if practical, rather than splitting up the group. Where elevators are unavoidable, consider taking them to the floor above the target and marching down one flight together).

How many people does the room hold? If the target’s office is too small, is there a larger area to take over? If some folks have to stand in the hall, where will they stand and how will they be kept informed? Is there a security force? Is it benign? Do you need a map for leadership and staff? When does the place close? Do you want to keep it from closing or tie it up all day? When does the rush hour traffic get heavy? When are they out to lunch? How long does it take to walk the march route? (pp. 155–156)

The leadership also will need to go over the demands in some detail—making sure that everyone understands and agrees with them completely, tightening them up, perhaps prioritizing them, and choosing specific individuals to ask them. Other roles, such as bus captains, chant or song leaders, those holding dramatic props, people to lead the charge past security guards and receptionists, marshals, people giving testimony, those who possess factual data, negotiators, record keepers, and press spokespeople need to be assigned at this time.
Under almost all circumstances (giving formal testimony in a public hearing would be one exception; reading a “pledge” that the group wants the target to sign or a prepared statement to the media might be others) it is much better if leaders do not read and instead speak directly to the target(s). There are multiple reasons. Few of us are any better at public reading than public speaking. Reading tends to suck the soul and passion out of heartfelt experiential statements and demands. Reading, when done poorly—even when written entirely by the person speaking—makes it appear that staff or other leaders are manipulating the speakers and telling them what to say. It often makes the Action Group look disorganized, unsure about what they really want, and vulnerable to an aggressive target. Exceptions to this point often are in order when English is not the first language of the person speaking. But the more that leaders with speaking parts communicate that they genuinely own the words they use, the more effectively they will present these words, both to targets and the assembled media.

Therefore, rehearsal is a key aspect of any action planning meeting. Role-playing is key. Done well, it is lots of fun, helps break any tension or nervousness, and demystifies the target. Individual leaders have a chance to go through their parts until they feel confident. Usually a staff member will play the role of the target, helping prepare leaders for the upcoming give-and-take of verbal interaction and testing them with assorted predictable countertactics. “What will we do if he or she says we’re in the wrong department? Or there’s no money available? Or members of our own community are causing the problem?” Moshe ben Asher (1984) also cites four basic rules for face-to-face engagements:

- No “giveaways” of strategic information to the target. Keep cards close to the vest.
- No explanations that get leaders off track, redefine issues, and enable targets to evade demands.
- No justifications of the issue, the demands, or the action that puts leaders on the defensive.
- No arguments or debates with the target about the validity of the issue and demands.

Allies should be called; pro bono lawyers lined up; and fact sheets, flyers, press releases, posters, and dramatic props prepared. Transportation to the action often will need to be arranged. Community members never should congregate directly at an action site such as the statehouse, the target’s home, or an office building. Arriving separately and spread over time, they likely will feel powerless and perhaps intimidated. This also eliminates the element of surprise and leaves the early arrivals vulnerable to the countertactics of the opposition. Rather, the group should meet on its
own or neutral turf from which it either can march or take a bus to the action, singing songs and chanting along the way. This collective experience gives leaders a chance to brief the group, builds organizational solidarity, and fosters a sense of spirit. This is a time for people to get fired up and to experience their collective power.

**Assessment**

An effective Action Plan should build in provisions for evaluation of all aspects of the issue campaign. It’s especially important to take the time for a thorough debriefing process after each individual action. Usually, some assessment will be done as part of the natural review of events on the bus ride home, over coffee, or as the meeting place gets cleaned up. But a more thorough, structured process is in order after each of the largest actions. A series of logical questions can be used to stimulate analysis, critique, and planning for next steps in the campaign.

- **What happened?** I am always amazed by the range of different opinions held by people who participated together at the same action. There is strength in unity, and disparate accounts of what just transpired undermine group cohesion and solidarity. The Action Group needs to develop a shared interpretation of and explanation about this slice of social reality. While there’s no need to go so far as to establish a “party line,” nevertheless it’s important to arrive at a consensus about what the target has agreed or refused to do, and how much progress has been made toward organizational goals and objectives. As different leaders and members lay out their own perspectives, agreeing and disagreeing with others in the process, a consensually validated viewpoint begins to emerge; a common account of the status of the issue campaign is socially constructed. With a degree of fundamental accord established, it is easier to move to other, more probing questions.

- **Why did this happen?** At this point, it is possible to begin analyzing the reasons for success or lack thereof. Typically, the early focus of discussion will center around the behavior of the target—her or his reaction to a face-to-face encounter with large numbers of organized community members, how resistant he or she was or was not, the personal style he or she used when interacting, and the usage of various predicted or unforeseen countertactics. There’s also usually some review of the Action Group’s ability to influence the target during the action, before the analysis inevitably moves to some critique of the action group’s performance. Two questions normally arise:

  - **What did we do well?**
  - **What might we have done differently?**
Obviously, the answers will vary from action to action. Broad categories to be examined include recruitment, turnout, leadership roles, secondary roles, the ability to attract allies, strategic and tactical planning, timing, the execution of direct-action tactics, response to countertactics, the articulation of demands, negotiations, the ability to secure commitments from the target, logistics, and media coverage. There’s no great need to structure the order for reviewing these elements, but the sequencing of the two questions is important.

Many people have a tendency to regard the subject of “evaluation” with a sinking feeling of dread in the pits of their stomachs. Perhaps it’s a holdover from school, sports, or the workplace, but the topic often is associated with being criticized and blamed for assorted failures. As one grassroots leader recently observed, “I always figured evaluation was the time when somebody tells me how I screwed up.” Obviously, this is a dynamic to be avoided, especially with individuals still experiencing the pain of oppression, discrimination, and disempowerment. Nevertheless, both positive and negative assessment are necessary to improve the Action Group’s functioning and the leadership’s capacities.

Therefore, assessment almost always should begin with a review of what was done well. And I have yet to see a single action where there was not a whole range of positive elements to extol. After a lively action, most participants will be “pumped,” and it’s normal for folks to celebrate and have fun. It’s a time to appreciate and congratulate, to laud and applaud. Building in time for recognition helps make the whole debriefing process enjoyable and nonthreatening for everyone involved. Within this upbeat context, it becomes relatively easy to raise the additional question about what could be done differently. Clearly, the purpose is not to assign blame, but rather to make constructive criticism that will help guide future planning and action. And, ultimately, the discussion logically turns to preliminary planning for next steps in the campaign (or new issues, if the current situation is resolved).

• Where do we go from here? Often, this is a relatively short discussion, best saved for the next proactive planning meeting. However, this is the time to assess the consequences of the action and its overall impact on the issue campaign. Community members may perceive the action as ranging from a victory accomplishing all of the GCO’s goals and objectives, through a step forward in that process, a “wash” with both positives and negatives, a step backward, to a crushing defeat. It’s helpful to get some level of agreement at this point, but a full consensus may not be possible until the Action Group begins planning its next steps.

The analysis born of assessment naturally evolves into envisioning subsequent goals and objectives for social change, followed by another round of planning, acting, and evaluating (Chavez, 1990) as the organizing
process continues. Obviously, the stage “where the action is” tends to be the most dynamic and exciting of these four phases. It’s at this point that a GCO actually moves forward to address the issues and problems that most concern community members. Regardless of whether the approach is Social Action or Community Development, the most effective actions will enable participants to achieve some level of success, develop a degree of ownership of the campaign, directly experience their own power through collective action, and have fun in the process.

ACORN’S CAMPAIGN AGAINST HOUSEHOLD FINANCE
Maude Hurd, ACORN National President, and Lisa Donner, Director, ACORN Financial Justice Center

ACORN’s campaign against predatory lending provides an excellent example of how the grassroots community-organizing principles outlined in this chapter actually get applied in practice.

Background

Access to mortgage credit long has been central to ACORN’s work, because home ownership is such a crucial element in building stability and enabling low- and moderate-income families to acquire and control community assets. Our work to fight predatory lending has been a logical and necessary addition to these efforts, consistent with our broader commitment to increasing neighborhood coherence and resident power. The goals of the anti–predatory lending campaign always have included changing lender behavior, changing policy, increasing the choices available to ACORN members, and actively engaging affected borrowers and their neighbors in this fight.

The explosion of predatory lending in ACORN communities—low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, especially those with residents of color—emerged as an organizing issue in a variety of ways. Many ACORN members began reporting increased problems paying their loans, while growing numbers of foreclosures led to many more vacant houses in their neighborhoods. And clients of the ACORN Housing Corporation began to experience new problems.

The ACORN Housing Corporation (AHC) was established in 1986 as an outgrowth of the organization’s work in pressuring banks to expand their lending in neighborhoods where ACORN members live. Because broad commitments to increase lending were difficult to enforce, ACORN needed a mechanism through which it actually could deliver loans on fair terms to its members. In the eighteen years since its founding, AHC has provided
loan counseling to more than 130,000 borrowers and helped over 50,000 families become first-time homeowners. This Community Development organization has creatively utilized specially modified underwriting, along with rate or fee discounts from lenders (negotiated by ACORN through Social Action), and intensive one-to-one counseling to enable a broad range of borrowers to qualify for loans that they have the ability to pay.

During the mid- and late 1990s, increasing numbers of AHC clients, who had begun as homeowners with affordable loans, were returning to AHC in serious trouble because of high-cost refinance loans. Borrowers had been pushed in a variety of ways to refinance out of their low-cost loans into new high-cost arrangements. Very often they had been seriously misled about the costs and consequences of the new refinance loans they were sold.

Once these problems surfaced, ACORN moved swiftly to launch an ambitious multistage, multilevel campaign carried out by its chapters all across the United States. The strategy to protect neighborhoods from predatory loans has included three key elements:

*Educational:* ACORN has educated homeowners and prospective buyers about the dangers and warning signs of abusive loans. We have done this through specific outreach efforts that take advantage of our daily presence in the most affected communities, and through the media generated by other aspects of the campaign. AHC mortgage counseling now includes the provision of information about predatory loans and how to avoid them, and additional postpurchase counseling now is offered to help borrowers seeking good refinance loans.

*Legislative:* The organization is fighting for new legislation at the state and local levels to make some of the most abusive lending practices, terms, and conditions per se illegal, and to require new or additional limits on others. ACORN has been a leading partner in successful fights for such legislation in the states of New Mexico, California, New York, and New Jersey, as well as the cities of Oakland, New York, and Los Angeles. As this book goes to press, bills also are moving forward in Massachusetts and Arizona.

*Targeting Individual Lenders:* A series of campaigns has been directed at individual lenders who are major players in the subprime market. As a result, lenders have been forced to make significant changes in their business practices, while the campaigns aimed at them, including strategies such as direct action, have highlighted problems requiring legislative and regulatory solutions. ACORN’s campaign against Household Finance will be featured in this case study.

Before an in-depth examination of the Household Campaign, it’s important to touch on ACORN’s efforts to push for predatory lending policy change in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. In 2001, the organization
Roots to Power

released the first national and city-by-city study examining the proportion of purchase and refinance loans made by subprime lenders in lower income and minority neighborhoods. Updates have been produced each succeeding year. To maximize their impact, we have released these studies at local press conferences, where ACORN members, often accompanied by local and state elected officials, speak about their own loans and the problems being caused in their communities. More than seventy major news publications and TV and radio stations have covered these press events on an annual basis.

Multiple meetings with legislators and regulators also have been convened in Washington, D.C., enabling these decision-makers to hear directly from borrowers currently in the grips of predatory loans. These encounters have been designed to move from individual “horror stories” about hardship to specific demands for action to resolve systemic problems. Such efforts helped push HUD and U.S. Treasury officials to hold a series of field hearings about predatory lending around the country in 2000, followed by a published report. These hearings provided excellent handles for local actions where ACORN members turned out in full force to testify and give witness—usually the only “average residents” to do so.

Household Finance

Since the late 1990s, Household Finance, along with Beneficial (a once-independent lender purchased by Household in 1998), has been either the largest or the second largest subprime lender by loan volume every year. By 2000, the company was making $15.3 billion in mortgage loans a year. As increasing numbers of ACORN members began experiencing problems with Household loans, a campaign to force changes in the company’s policies and practices emerged as a key part of the overall effort against predatory lending. When the campaign began, there had been virtually no public scrutiny of this major player in the loan industry. The outrage of our members coupled with the significance of the company in the market made Household an attractive target, but its size and the scale of revisions we would be demanding also insured that it would be a formidable adversary.

ACORN’s campaign drew on a wide variety of strategies and tactics. There was an element of outreach and membership recruitment as the organization identified and mobilized community residents experiencing problems with Household loans. Action research was conducted to gather, analyze, and report data documenting the company’s business practices. The company’s lending offices and processing centers, and even the homes of senior executives, were targeted for direct action. An extensive media campaign successfully publicized problems with Household loans through newspaper, radio, and TV stories around the country. A shareholder strategy twice moved resolutions on predatory lending and reached out to govern-
ment holders of Household shares. ACORN’s legal strategy entailed filing two class action lawsuits charging the company with unfair and deceptive trade practices. A corporate strategy brought the loan issues onto the radar screens of Wall Street analysts covering the firm. A regulatory strategy pushed state attorneys general and banking regulators to investigate Household and take action against them. And a legislative strategy sought reform bills making a number of lenders’ predatory tactics illegal.

**Building and Engaging the Base**

ACORN’s work on this campaign is part of a broader effort to build power and capacity in low- and moderate-income communities across the United States. Many of the members who initially were active in the campaign had joined the organization around a variety of other issues. As their problems with Household loans became more severe, and as ACORN began focusing on this issue by asking questions about members’ refinance experiences, they quickly got involved. They were joined by other “regular” leaders and members who were concerned about the impact of predatory lending on their neighborhoods. At the same time, even though many predatory lending victims involved in the campaign did not have their own loans with Household, they recognized that changing this company’s practices would make a difference in the industry as a whole.

There were very little “hard data” available to document the problem. Talking with people about their loans in the context of a community-based campaign made it possible to record and document information that otherwise would not have been accessible. Many homeowners felt like their loan difficulties were their own personal problems, rather than systemic issues. The campaign proved to be a classic exercise in moving “from the personal to the political.” Those who got involved in the campaign participated in planning activities, demonstrations, public speaking, media events, meetings with regulators, and legislative lobbying. Nevertheless, many families were threatened with the immediate loss of their homes and were desperate for individual solutions sooner than such a campaign possibly could deliver them. ACORN referred some individuals with pressing claims to lawyers for help, applied pressure to force loan modifications or payment reductions for others, and linked still others with AHC for assistance refinancing to much better loans.

**Building the Case**

ACORN worked hard to document and record the terms and conditions of borrowers’ loans as precisely as possible. Some features of the loans only were visible in the paperwork, which many borrowers no longer had or
never had; in many cases, the company was not forthcoming in responding to requests for new copies of these documents. Other loan features required an understanding of what the lender actually said to the borrower and when these conversations took place. In other cases, a detailed picture of the borrower’s financial situation before the loan was necessary, including the amount and rates of other debts and the reasons for refinancing or taking cash out of the equity of their homes. Collecting this kind of information from borrowers around the country enabled ACORN to develop an increasingly clear picture of the pattern of what the company was doing, how they were doing it, and how they needed to change.

Some issues were readily apparent. The company was charging almost 8 percent of the loan amount in fees, which they financed into virtually every first loan. In contrast, at that time, “A” lenders were charging well below 1 percent in fees. Such high fees could amount to $10,000 or even $20,000 on a single loan. Borrowers often were not aware of what had been charged in fees, or had been told only at the closing. While these fees were called “discount points,” they certainly hadn’t negotiated them in exchange for a lower rate. Like other major subprime lenders, Household was aggressively selling financed single-premium credit insurance—a particularly abusive loan product that is financed into the loan itself, meaning that borrowers pay interest on the insurance for the life of the loan. In many cases, ACORN found that Household essentially was refinancing people’s perfectly good first mortgages into new loans at much higher rates.

Other practices only became clear as ACORN talked with more borrowers. For example, Household regularly was extending extremely high interest rate second mortgages along with their first loans. Between the two loans, borrowers frequently owed Household more than their homes were worth and were making little or no progress in paying them down. Similarly, it was not until the organization first obtained a copy of the sales materials that we were able to document the practice of selling loans based on an “effective interest rate.” This scheme took advantage of confusion about the difference between payments every two weeks (26 per year) and those made twice monthly. As the campaign progressed, this knowledge was supplemented by former, and occasionally current, Household employees calling to talk about what they did and how they did it.

Direct Action

ACORN members around the country planned and participated in scores of demonstrations at Household offices. With signs and props including sharks made of cardboard, paper, and even inflatable pool floats, they marched and chanted in front of and inside local Household offices in central cities and suburban malls, often refusing to leave until evicted by the police. At these actions, members demanded that the company...
change its practices and give back what they had taken from borrowers in the past; but they also pushed to resolve the concerns of individual borrowers. Employees almost never responded by making changes on the spot, but the accompanying publicity frequently resulted in loan adjustments.

Besides disrupting work at particular offices and warning away potential customers, these actions also provoked anxiety and exacerbated morale problems among the company’s workforce. Employees have recounted anecdotes about internal memos and calls from management advising on how to deal with ACORN. Some loan officers began to raise their own questions about the company’s practices.

When Household staged a public relations event to announce a “window dressing” set of “best practices” in response to ACORN’s demands for substantive changes, an angry delegation of members arrived as uninvited guests. They marched, chanted, and distributed flyers outside the event, loudly disrupting the proceedings. Press coverage focused as much on ACORN’s criticisms as on Household’s claims of reform. The organization took similar action at a regional conference the company held to reassure investors. At the 2002 ACORN convention in Chicago, nearly 2,000 members from around the country divided into action groups and by the hundreds paid visits to the luxurious suburban homes of senior Household executives. They marched to the front doors, asked to speak with the executives, and, when unable to do so, distributed flyers to neighbors and at nearby exclusive shopping areas, explaining why they were there and what they wanted.

**Media**

Exposing Household’s practices in the media was key, and over the course of two years, more than 300 stories about ACORN’s campaign and Household’s practices were carried by newspapers, radio, and TV around the country. These stories covered demonstrations, press conferences, interviews at the homes of borrowers, and events at city councils and in neighborhoods. The willingness of ACORN members to talk personally with reporters about their own experiences was a major factor in the powerful media coverage. Additionally, careful work with reporters from a number of major publications facilitated several feature pieces. *Forbes* published a long investigative article focusing on concerns about Household’s lending practices; and ACORN contributed by providing extensive materials for the author, including loan paperwork, borrower stories and contacts, and linkage to former employees. Similarly, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* ran stories including ACORN material highly critical of Household’s practices.

The media coverage served the multiple functions of putting pressure directly on the company, encouraging regulatory action, and helping to engage
additional borrowers in the campaign. As coverage increased, greater numbers of borrowers contacted ACORN after seeing a television report, hearing a radio interview, or reading a newspaper article.

Shareholder Strategy

This aspect of the campaign forced Household to respond to concerns about its lending practices on additional fronts, while simultaneously generating even more interest and publicity, because of the relative novelty of this approach as part of a domestic low-income consumer issue. With help from allies United for a Fair Economy (UFE)/Responsible Wealth, who drafted the texts and found socially responsible shareholders willing to file it, ACORN twice had resolutions introduced calling for executive compensation to be tied to clear and measurable efforts to fight predatory lending. In 2002, the second resolution received 30 percent of the shareholder vote—an extremely high degree of support for such a critical proposal, reflecting the public battering the company was taking from the multiple components of the campaign.

Also as part of a shareholder strategy, ACORN leaders in New York used their political connections with State Comptroller Carl McCall (who later ran for governor) to communicate with him about problems with Household loans. As a result, the comptroller, who is the sole trustee of the giant New York state retirement fund, issued a statement of concern about the company’s abusive lending practices and their potential impact on the retirement fund’s reputation and earnings. In similar fashion, California members worked to communicate with their state treasurer regarding the state employees’ retirement fund. In St. Louis and Boston, local ACORN chapters successfully passed resolutions in their city councils calling on city government to divest from Household; and in many parts of the country, ACORN worked with local allies from organized labor to pass similar resolutions with regard to union pension funds.

Legal Action

Large-scale legal action has not often been a key part of ACORN strategy; but in the Household campaign, filing two class action lawsuits was crucial to demanding that the organization have a role in the eventual resolution of the crisis we did so much to create. The lawsuits also made ACORN’s efforts concrete and easier for the press to understand and discuss. Working with the law firm Minor, Barnhill & Galland, P.C., we filed the two class action lawsuits against Household, charging them with unfair and deceptive trade practices. The lawsuits spelled out a detailed set of allegations based on the information gathered from so many borrow-
ers. The organization, along with individual borrowers, was named as a plaintiff in the suit filed in California. Negotiations toward a settlement began before any of the charges were litigated.

Wall Street

ACORN’s ability to get its message directly to Wall Street analysts who covered Household enabled the campaign to have a significant financial impact on the company. The growing volume of public criticism and press coverage, coupled with the organization’s continued direct action and legal strategy, convinced a number of analysts to take a closer look at the situation. As analysts spoke directly with borrowers, they began to see the predatory lending pattern, and started asking hard questions about Household’s practices. The combination of pending litigation, potential regulatory action against the company, reputational risk, and possible costs of changing business practices to adjust to criticisms began to cause doubt about Household’s future financial strength. During the period of this campaign, the company’s stock dropped from a high above 60 to a low closer to 20—losses far more severe than those experienced by the market as a whole or other companies in the consumer finance sector. Perhaps more important, largely due to concerns about predatory lending, Household’s cost of funds rose dramatically as they began paying a higher rate to raise funds on the bond market. Household itself essentially became a subprime borrower, having to pay rates as high as 9 percent for funds.

These two changes put the company in difficult financial straits, and probably contributed to their decisions to settle with the attorneys general, begin talking with ACORN, and ultimately sell out to the London-based (HSBC), one of the largest banking and financial services organizations in the world. Despite the force of multiple pressure points against Household and the damaging information about their practices, the company may have chosen to engage in a more protracted legal wrangle without the additional serious threat to their ability to do business.

Legislation

ACORN, in collaboration with other groups, continued efforts to win legislative change to fight predatory lending on a separate track, side by side with the Household campaign. Legislative change provided another angle to change a number of Household practices by making them illegal. The new laws against predatory lending made financed points and fees, and prepayment penalties as large as those routinely charged by Household, illegal, thereby supporting the argument that these were illegitimate
practices everywhere. Activists on the Household campaign frequently testified at legislative hearings, lobbied elected officials, and spoke to the media about their personal experiences. They also helped ACORN leaders who hadn’t had loan problems understand why the issue was important and their involvement was needed.

At the same time, the broader campaign against Household helped raise public awareness about the need for legislative change. Documenting abusive practices by such a large lender also highlighted the need for serious reform to state legislatures. ACORN’s growing body of evidence about the pattern of these abuses drove home the point to legislators, regulators, and the press that these were not isolated cases. This had been a frequent charge of industry defenders, who suggested that occasional “sob stories” did not warrant a systemic response. Demonstrating that the company that made about 10 percent of all subprime loans included harsh terms as a matter of course severely weakened this argument.

**Regulatory Strategy**

In addition to direct pressure on Household, ACORN also pushed state regulators to take action against the company. The organization systematically brought cases to state regulators, laying out the problems and patterns seen with this company’s loans, and asking them to take action. We also took advantage of our relationships with political allies, encouraging them to push these regulatory authorities to investigate our complaints.

Action by state regulators ultimately proved to be a powerful element in winning changes from Household; and several states, including Washington, began major investigations of Household at an early point in the campaign. In April 2002, the Washington State Department of Financial Institutions produced a report documenting complaints from borrowers who had experienced problems with Household loans. This report had a tremendous impact on subsequent state and federal investigations into Household’s practices.

However, with these few important exceptions, we found that regulators’ standard practice was to review subprime loans and lenders based on their paperwork alone, assuming that if this material appeared to be in order, no problem existed. In many states, complaint records were not even kept, much less plans to follow up to insure compliance. ACORN members and Household victims submitted complaints to attorneys general and bank regulators across the country. Typically, multiple complaints were delivered in “gentle actions,” where a press conference was held outside the regulator’s office and then the complaints were presented. Comprehensive documentation was provided and the organization pressed for meetings with staff to go over the complaints case by case, with borrowers telling their stories and staff reviewing the systemic and legal issues
identified. State regulators were invited to community hearings and public events where they had the opportunity to listen to borrowers.

For example, in Minnesota we invited Governor Ventura’s newly appointed banking commissioner to a community meeting to hear direct testimony from Household borrowers. Commissioner Jim Bernstein was reluctant, but eventually agreed to attend with the caveat that he would not appear on stage. Once there, he listened along with more than 100 ACORN members who had gathered to hear their neighbors talk about the problems with their loans. Then, rather than staying in the audience, he did in fact come up onstage and pledge to investigate the company. Over the next several months, Commissioner Bernstein became extremely committed to working on this case, and his office was among those that took the lead on the national investigation.

A multistate strategy was important, because many states would not have been willing to take on a lender the size of Household on their own. Cooperation across states made action more possible in many areas of the country. The broader public campaign not only brought many issues to the attention of regulators, but also helped to magnify the threat of their potential investigation, increasing pressure on the company to settle. The media and Wall Street connections that had been cultivated helped spread the word about impending investigations.

Once rumors began to circulate, ACORN’s charges gained even more credibility. As speculation mounted that Household soon would be forced to make a substantial settlement, the financial screws began to tighten on the company. The fact that Household settled the regulator action relatively quickly certainly was due in part to the convincing power of multiple state regulatory agencies, but all the other aspects of the campaign also heightened the company’s vulnerability.

Ultimately, the attorneys general and state regulators secured a settlement that distributed $484 million to borrowers. The settlement institutionalized a number of the “best practice” changes that Household had made to stem criticism over the course of the campaign into an enforceable agreement. Individual borrowers received an average of $2,000—money that they otherwise never would have recovered. Their rights to sue in the event that they are threatened with foreclosure also were preserved. The settlement was the largest ever in a predatory lending case and marked the first time that all the states had worked together on this issue. The precedents created by this settlement establish powerful handles to utilize vis-à-vis other lenders in future campaigns.

**Legal Settlement**

Shortly before the attorneys general settlement, Household had begun negotiating with ACORN, both to settle the pending lawsuits and to end the public campaign against them. We began these discussions before we
Roots to Power

knew exactly what shape the attorneys general settlement would take, and finished them once it already was announced. Therefore, part of our work was shaping a proposal that would add to what already was accomplished between Household and the regulators.

Meanwhile, the company was under such tremendous financial pressure that it was sold to a larger bank—the London-based HSBC—making it part of a more highly regulated financial institution. The ACORN settlement built on and expanded the best practice changes incorporated by the attorneys general and provided additional relief for injured borrowers. The attorneys general settlement allowed each state to determine its own formula to distribute their share of the $484 million. **ACORN’s settlement added about $120 million to the payments made by Household,** with these dollars mostly allocated to a **foreclosure prevention fund (FAP) for Household borrowers.**

Funds from this pool can be used to buy down the rate of the principal of loans that are unaffordable to borrowers, either temporarily because of a change in circumstance or permanently if they were not affordable when the loan was made. Permanent changes in loans can alter the terms and payments on borrowers’ loans dramatically, while temporary changes can provide thousands of dollars of relief and allow borrowers to catch up—giving them the opportunity to refinance into a better loan from a more stable and creditworthy position. This FAP program allows the additional funds to be directed in a concentrated way to those borrowers who are most in need and who otherwise would be most likely to lose their homes, be forced into additional damaging loans to temporarily save their homes, or otherwise have unmanageable debt prolonged by payment plans they cannot in fact afford.

The legal settlement also required Household to spend millions of dollars to fund outreach and education to protect borrowers from predatory lending. **These dollars join the millions the company gave out during the campaign in various attempts to clean up their image or seek cover from broader criticisms by funding groups in return for praise of their practices.**

The FAP program already has provided substantial relief to hundreds of borrowers in only its first months of existence. A few examples follow:

- Susan and Brian H. had two loans with Household. Through the FAP program, their second mortgage of $26,000 was forgiven and the H’s were approved for a permanent 2 percent interest rate on their first mortgage.
- Denise is a single mother with two children. Through the FAP program, Denise’s second mortgage of $10,000 was forgiven, and the rate of her first mortgage was reduced permanently to 6 percent. Her payment decreased from $1,825 to $881, saving her nearly $1,000 per month and $169,920 over the life of the loan.
- When Kim J. became permanently disabled and lost her job, her husband Melvin took on three jobs to try to bring their mortgage current. Through
the FAP, the J’s qualified for a permanent interest rate reduction from 10.5 percent to 3.9 percent. Payments for the J’s have been reduced from $1,270 to $647, a savings of $112,140 over the life of the loan.

Benita H. called ACORN Housing in February 2004, when her home was scheduled for sheriff’s sale the coming month as a result of payment problems due in part to a family crisis. Through the FAP program, the sale of Benita’s home was stopped immediately, her account was brought current, the interest rate on the loan reduced to 4.9 percent, and her monthly payment lowered from $585 to $325.

Cumulatively, among the most important practice changes accomplished over the course of the campaign and by the attorneys general and ACORN settlements were:

- A reduction in points and fees from more than 7.5 percent of the loan amount on every loan to a maximum of 5 percent.
- A reduction of prepayment penalties from five years to three years on all loans, both new and existing.
- A prohibition on making loans for substantially more than borrowers’ homes are worth, thus effectively trapping them in high-cost loans and forcing them to take additional loans at the same time.
- Ending the sale of financed credit insurance and other similar products.
- Ending deceptive sales practices, including designating loans as revolving lines of credit in order to evade restrictions on the highest cost fixed-rate loans, promising lower “effective rates” through bimonthly payment plans, and hiding the points, fees, or prepayment penalties charged on a loan. Household now is required to provide much clearer information about the costs of the loans at every step of the process, including providing key loan paperwork in a language the borrower understands.
- An end to billing practices that essentially encouraged borrowers to fall behind on their high-rate second loans, meaning that they often made little if any progress in paying them off.
- Sharply curtailing the use of “live check” solicitations to sell refinance loans—the practice of mailing out checks, which when cashed, automatically become loans.
- A legally binding requirement that loans carry not just a benefit but a net benefit to borrowers, considering both the costs and the advantages of the loan.

In addition, HSBC, Household’s new owner, has pledged to move quickly to implement policies that assure that borrowers with “A,” or very good, credit receive loans at “A” rates. These changes do not produce a perfect set of lending practices by any means. For example, five points remain an
extremely high standard charge, as does a standard prepayment penalty of six months’ interest. But on a volume of lending as high as Household’s, these changes nonetheless add up to hundreds of millions of dollars in reduced costs to borrowers every year. These reforms also contribute substantially to making certain practices—though still perfectly legal in many states—less legitimate for the industry as a whole.

Conclusion

Much remains to be done to even the playing field in the mortgage lending world, arriving at a point where predatory lending abuses aren’t allowed to perpetuate and amplify differences in wealth, assets, and power. But as a result of ACORN’s Household campaign, hundreds of millions of dollars were returned to borrowers, thousands of borrowers will be able to keep homes they otherwise were in danger of losing, and a giant corporation was required to make changes in business practices that will save consumers hundreds of millions of dollars a year going forward. At the same time, the campaign contributed to the drive for legislation in states around the country, helped move state regulators to take unprecedented concerted action in this area, and increased capacity in our neighborhoods to take on these and other similar problems in the future.

Overall, this campaign utilized a wide range of approaches, strategies, handles, and tactics that can be used to demand changes in corporate policy and make legislators and regulators more accountable to low- and moderate-income people. It was waged at the national, regional, state, municipal, and neighborhood levels with a range of direct and indirect targets confronted by ACORN members and a wide array of allies. The campaign had distinct phases, while simultaneously being conducted on multiple fronts. Thousands of new people were engaged in efforts to protect their own rights and/or to support their neighbors. Solid grassroots organizing and classic direct action were combined with carefully documented research, the creative use of litigation, effective legislative lobbying, and skillful media relations work. ACORN emerged from the campaign with a major victory and significant gains in organizational mileage.

This chapter defines a reasonably systematic way of developing campaigns designed both to win and to build the collective power base of the constituency. Yet, we live in a world that is disorderly and imprecise. Spontaneity and imagination never should be sacrificed. Each situation is unique, with its own opportunities and surprises. Developing strategy and Action Plans is like doing doorknocking—it’s more art than science. There’s no set formula that has to be rigidly followed. The self-interest response of targets often can be predicted by determining what they hope to gain or fear losing, although inconsistent, surprise reactions often
should be expected. Frequently, tactics are developed best by ad-libbing off
the flow of the action, breaking the rules (even some of Alinsky’s) in the
process. It’s important not to get locked into a fixed Action Plan that sti-
fles creativity, the element of surprise, and the action-reaction dynamic.
Plans can and should change. What is constant is the need for *Action*. So
get into the street and raise some hell!
ACTION PLANS

Tactics
- Consistent with Strategy
- Appropriate for the Campaign
- Effective vis-à-vis the Target
- Action-Reaction
- Remain Proactive
- Develop Media Plan

Countertactics: “The 7 D’s of Defense”
- Deflecting, Delaying, Deceiving, Dividing, Denying, Discrediting, Destroying

Timetable
- Counting Backwards
- Campaign Phases
- Incremental Objectives

Recruitment: Face-to-Face
- Doorknocking/Home Visits, Housemeetings, Presentations

Preparation for Action
- Research on Target
- Logistical Plans
- Action Planning Meetings
  - Formulate Demands
  - Prioritize Demands
  - Divide up Roles
  - Role Play and Practice

Assessment
- What happened?
- Why did this happen?
- What did we do well?
- What might we have done differently?
- Where do we go from here?

Continue the Process of Envisioning, Planning, Acting, and Assessing
Chapter 6

“Keeping It All Together”
Organizational Development and Maintenance

BROADENING THE BASE

It’s one thing to organize a successful group and quite another to hold it all together. Creating a grassroots community organization is not like building a house brick by brick, plank by plank into a fixed, permanent structure. An organization is dynamic, not static, and as ACORN founder Wade Rathke says, “If it isn’t growing, it’s dying.”

Organizational growth depends on retaining old members and enlisting new ones. The success of both endeavors depends on a combination of things: a shared, compelling vision; a functional, democratic structure; participatory group processes; and a strong capacity for leadership development.

Obviously, one key to organizational maintenance is keeping members active, but some attrition is inevitable as people’s lives, responsibilities, and concerns change over time. The fact that membership commitment may ebb and flow should be squarely recognized, but there is a number of measures a GCO can take to guard against an overly high dropoff rate.

Certainly, the long-range organizational vision will be key. Fixing potholes will not keep the membership active and excited forever. It is important to develop a new sense of community and the challenge of more ambitious goals. Organizational growth and maturity should lead to both the will and the capacity to take on more challenging issues. The organizing process should build commitment to and a thirst for changing power relationships. When opportunities arise, GCOs need to seize the moment, taking bold steps in pursuit of transformative social change. More people will stay active if they believe they are part of an effort that is exciting and momentous.

ACORN provides an excellent example. The organization’s vision and philosophy are stressed in everything it does. There is a commitment to
organizing as many low- and moderate-income people as possible, wherever they live and work. Strong linkage has been made to homemakers, domestics, hotel employees, fast-food workers, and other low-wage earners, as ACORN attempts to deal with issues in the workplace as well as on the block.

The goal is to organize the constituency, not merely to improve a specific neighborhood. The neighborhood is a manageable size unit, allowing the organization to start “where people are at” on self-interest issues of immediate concern. But producing quick victories at the neighborhood level is not the sole end of the action. The leadership recognizes the inter-relationship of issues at the city, state, and national levels. There is a broader commitment to put power in the hands of low- and moderate-income people.

As with all organizations, ACORN’s resources are limited. Questions of breadth versus depth emerge. Certainly all of its budget could be spent in one city such as New Orleans, Philadelphia, Chicago, or Detroit. It also could concentrate on one state such as New York, Ohio, or California. Alternatively, it could spread itself out further by attempting to have a presence in every city and state in the country. What’s the best way to achieve its long-range goals of redistributive change empowering low- and moderate-income people? At what point would the depth be so thin that only “paper organizations” would be formed in neighborhoods across the United States? When would a concentration of resources in fewer places seriously diminish the organization’s ability to wage statewide, regional or national campaigns?

To organize 10 percent of a neighborhood is both realistic and adequate for ACORN’s purposes. Obviously, this is not 10 percent of every low-income neighborhood—even in the cities where this GCO currently is successful. And, just as clearly, any organization that involves 50 percent of the residents will have a stronger base in that particular neighborhood. But if ACORN were to commit the resources to organize at this level of depth, it would have to do so by sacrificing breadth. Organizing more intensively in fewer places produces more clout on local issues, but at the price of power at the state, regional, and national levels. Decisions about the scope and scale of organizing should be made consistent with a GCO’s long-range goals. For ACORN, the current mix produces sufficient depth without compromising the breadth necessary to be an important player on many issues beyond the citywide level.

A decentralized coordinated structure allows local issue autonomy for neighborhood chapters, while providing a mechanism to undertake joint campaigns at the city, state, regional, and national levels. A representative decision-making board deals with issues at the higher levels, but doesn’t dictate on neighborhood affairs. Local groups can introduce their issues to the other ACORN chapters through the board and get support from
the parent organization. At all levels, there is an effort to find issues that
have the potential for broadening the base.

Thus, there is a mix of both local and higher-level campaigns. The larger
issues are linked to the long-range goals and expectations of ACORN. They
challenge power relationships and help realize visions for social change.
The neighborhood issues keep the base of the organization strong and ac-
tive on an immediate self-interest agenda. General issues, such as utility
rates or taxes, are not allowed to interfere with more specific local ones,
like the meat-rendering plant that stinks up the neighborhood or the clos-
ing of the local fire station.

There is an emphasis on the importance of internal fundraising to the
longer-term viability of the organization. This builds solidarity and an on-
going commitment to active involvement. ACORN leaders share a collec-
tive vision that requires an independent source of funds. They recognize
that significant conflict is inevitable and refuse to depend heavily on in-
stitutional moneys.

The ACORN example shows how the organizational vision, a good
structure, effective group processes, and a commitment to shared values
can retain existing members while attracting new ones. It is critical that
emerging leaders be plugged into meaningful, important roles. They need
to be challenged, trained, and prepared to take on positions of respon-
sibility. This is the way the core group is enlarged upon and new leadership
begins to develop. Whoever acts as organizer can help this process along.
Tasks such as dues collection, leafleting, and reminder phone calls should
be delegated whenever possible. This builds the emerging leaders’ sense of
investment in and ownership of the organization. It also frees organizers
to concentrate on expansion, rather than spending all their time on main-
tenance work.

When building for a new campaign, it is not sufficient for a group
merely to recruit its existing (and possibly inactive or declining) members.
People may have joined because of interests in totally different issues. In
other cases, various physical and emotional factors will prevent them from
participating. On the other hand, there still may be innumerable non-
members in the affected constituency.

All this argues for continuous outreach to the whole constituency,
rather than just contacting the current membership. It is a classic case of the
need to organize the unorganized. Only by attracting and involving new peo-
ple can the GCO renew and regenerate itself in the face of the natural ten-
dency for people to lose interest, drop out, or become less active. Organiza-
tions are continually being reborn as new people get involved. Good “recruitment issues” appealing to a broad base of people and lend-
ing themselves to systematic face-to-face contact are what build or main-
tain the size of a GCO. Too often, groups focus most of their attention on
“maintenance issues” that don’t attract large numbers of new people.
When this happens, the power base can wither and die while the leadership stays preoccupied with winning policy reform.

Nevertheless, the “apathy” of the constituency usually is blamed for declines in membership. Anyone who has been around an organization probably has heard the familiar complaints about “dropouts” and been asked the eternal question, “How do you keep people involved?” Frequently, the most committed leaders and members criticize their colleagues for “only coming out when there’s something in it for themselves.” Yet, this is the essence of self-interest—“What’s in it for me?” or “WIFM.” People do participate in order to gain something. Unlike the limited number of leaders who can gain recognition, status, respect, self-esteem, confidence, skills, excitement, power, and personal satisfaction from their positions, most rank-and-file participants are attracted primarily by the prospects of victory on the issue, along with opportunities to connect with other community members.

There is a trade-off. Their involvement is needed to win through collective action. It also helps build the organization. They do their part by turning out for actions and playing a meaningful role in the campaign. Hopefully, the organization produces a concrete benefit or reform for them. When the campaign is over, most of them are back at home—even though their name may be on the GCO’s membership roles. If the experience not only provided a victory on the issue but also was exciting, fun, and satisfying, they probably will participate again—when it’s in their self-interests to do so. “Dropping out” may be logical and reasonable in the interim.

An organization’s members can be conceptualized as being arranged in a series of concentric circles. At the center are the top elected leaders and activists. The next circle includes second-line leaders and the most solid members who get involved in a majority of organizational actions and activities. Together, these two groups form the “core.” Next would come people who seldom take roles of responsibility or leadership but who identify with and participate in many organizational campaigns and functions. Succeeding circles would encompass those who take part sporadically and may or may not consider themselves members. If you prefer a more linear model, think of community members distributed along a continuum of commitment.

Organizational involvement correlates highly with an individual’s positive experiences through meaningful roles in participatory, action-oriented campaigns. Opportunities for more responsibility and work can be built into all activities, actions, and events—sort of a “leadership ladder” for new members to climb. It’s this kind of broad-based involvement that’s the strongest antidote for the tendencies toward centralized leadership and conservative, rigid organizational structure. The campaigns help renew the connection between leaders and their base of followers, increasing accountability and invigorating group processes.

And often the key lies with those who best could be categorized as second-line leaders, for these are the people who provide basic connection
between the top leaders and the rank-and-file members. As potential prime leaders themselves, they can offer both a healthy challenge to and a democratizing influence on the highest leaders, keeping them honest and on their toes. Their presence helps overcome the tendency for leaders to grow out of touch and to ignore their followers. Second-line leaders usually have not been recognized, accepted, or co-opted by the powers that be, and thus may be strong advocates for using direct-action strategies and tactics when the situation calls for such an approach. In short, their position and the dynamics of their possible rise to power make them a pivotal force.

Yet, too often when conservative entrenched leaders are in place, there’s a preoccupation with changing their behavior by “raising consciousness,” rather than by new people pressuring them from below. There may be workshops, training sessions, and a variety of other devices to “enlighten” the top leaders. Certainly, education and instruction are critical to the fundamental goal of leadership development. But such teaching and learning absolutely should not be limited to the top leadership echelons. When this occurs, the highest leaders become far more knowledgeable and sophisticated than the rest of the group’s members. This can lead to gaps in information and critical awareness. It only exacerbates the natural tendency for prime leaders to become distanced from their base and to centralize power.

The whole training process should be expanded and democratized. Second-line leaders and members need the kind of knowledge and skills that enable them to challenge and test the top leaders in a healthy way. Obviously, such an ambitious program means more work for those who recruit and organize for it. And perhaps it is less satisfying for ideologues searching for a small group of “true believer” converts. But it is critical to spread the wealth of information, skills, and political consciousness to as many people as possible.

Similarly, the same principle of maximizing opportunities for participation should be considered when bylaws are formulated. There should be a balance between the needs for efficiency and expertise on the one hand and involvement and training on the other. Too often the former is emphasized at the expense of the latter. In some cases, bylaws are written as though the group always functions in perfect harmony without power struggles or internal conflict. Such approaches emphasize technical tasks and skills, without much recognition of or stress on intragroup dynamics and processes.

Nevertheless, there is a limit to how much bylaws really can do. Ultimately, they merely serve as written rules and procedures for a group to follow. The same dynamics that enable a small faction to dominate an organization often allow that same group to ignore the official ground rules. If there are not other leaders and members willing and able to take on leaders who act undemocratically, bylaws alone offer little or no organizational protection, no matter how well crafted. Leadership accountability, membership participation, and organizational direct action cannot be legislated
by any legalistic, defensive cure-all set of rules. People, not paper, keep organizations open and action-oriented.

The real strength of good bylaws lies in their ability to specify positive ways in which new people can get involved. For instance, there should be a clear process by which rank-and-file members can approve and join a new committee to work on an issue of basic concern. Too often, such decisions are left in the hands of a small core group that may refuse to take on a new issue or may want to control the number and names of the people forming an action committee. Provisions should be in place allowing people to come to an open meeting where they can endorse a new issue by majority vote and freely volunteer to join the relevant Action Committee.

A committee structure that rewards action and broad-based participation helps prevent excessive bureaucracy and the centralization of power. Responsibility and accountability can be built in through the guidelines and procedures by which committees are approved, formed, and terminated and by which leadership is chosen. More committees working on more issues give more people exposure to more learning situations. This enables community members to get involved in a meaningful way at any point in time. New or second-line leaders can come to the fore.

Whether the specific maintenance problem is dropouts, centralized power, lack of democracy, co-optation, or conservative bureaucratization, all are linked by the fact that GCOs with these difficulties no longer are participatory, mass-based, and action-oriented. In each case, the most effective remedy is to cut new issues and recruit large numbers of people whose self-interest directly is affected.

Where there is a likelihood of resistance, or even backlash, from entrenched leaders who feel threatened by change, it is critical that the organizer and new leadership attempt to neutralize them. They don’t have to be won over to the point of enthusiastically welcoming new issues and leaders. But it is immensely helpful if the top leaders do not actively oppose outreach and recruitment. Bylaws, along with organizational culture and tradition, can play a crucial part in legitimating and promoting this emphasis on broadening the base. It is the task of whoever functions as organizer to do this.

Regular contact with community members through doorknocking, home visits, one-on-ones, housemeetings, presentations to groups, and networking helps infuse the organization with “new blood” and keeps it vibrant. These outreach activities are a primary means for surfacing new issues, as well as identifying potential activists or leaders who can be plugged into the group’s activities. It is the best way for the GCO to stay connected to its community base, “personalizing” the organization, holding its collective ears close to the ground, and letting people know what’s going on. The broader and deeper the base, the more power the organization will be able to wield.
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Power flows from large numbers of organized people acting together. Leaders give meaning and direction to that collective action, capturing the essence of the hopes, fears, and demands of community members. They articulate the goals of their followers; they point the way for resolution of the issues. Someone has to be committed and capable enough to get out in front and help the group accomplish the task at hand. Someone has to take ownership and control over organizational actions and activities. Leaders do this, inspiring and guiding their followers in the process.

Characteristics and Qualities

At times, the responsibilities will be public and visible; in other instances, the work will be quiet and internal. In all situations, those who function as leaders must take the initiative to motivate others, showing the way through example. Being a grassroots leader is a difficult role, requiring a wide range of personal characteristics and talents. Nobody can be expected to do it all. The individual who can lead a militant direct action against the mayor may be poorly equipped to chair a monthly chapter meeting—or vice versa. One person may be great at organizing a fundraising event, another may be a top negotiator, a third a brilliant strategist, and a fourth a terrific recruiter. Organizationally it’s important to try to match people’s interests and skills with the group’s greatest leadership needs.

Clearly, this does not require the discovery or development of all-around superstar leaders, expert in every conceivable area. Even if such people existed, it would be dangerous to develop dependence on them. What if they moved away, got sick, had to spend more time at work, or dropped out to deal with a family crisis? Where would the group turn for leadership? A great basketball team needs a mix of rebounders, defenders, playmakers, and scorers, as well as specific role-players who know their jobs and stick to them. Talent is critical, but so is the meshing of individual egos and abilities into a team identity that transcends any one person. Organizations work the same way. Some people may be stars of sorts, elected to office or charismatically leading public actions. Others may play a more limited, less visible role, providing commitment and energy for a host of critical internal tasks. All need to work together, sharing responsibility, work, and credit, functioning as a team in pursuit of common goals.

While there is a wide range of leadership roles requiring a broad mix of talents and abilities, some common qualities are important regardless of the specific function undertaken. Clearly, anyone who leads must be connected to a “following” or be able to develop one very quickly. Trust and confidence must be established among those who will follow. Listening
skills should be strengthened along with the willingness and ability to let others get some recognition and glory. Leaders should be able to communicate well, inspiring and motivating their colleagues and increasing self-reliance, ownership, and control in the process.

Characteristics such as charisma, anger, courage, and intelligence all may help accomplish the above, but no one of these absolutely is essential in and of itself. What is required is a commitment to and investment in social change that drives a person to make the time sacrifice and do the hard work necessary for the task at hand. This takes energy, determination, assertiveness, persistence, and mental toughness. There are no guarantees for those who take collective action against the powers that be. Risks are required, pressures must be endured, sacrifices have to be made. The person accepting a leadership role in such a situation must have sufficient self-interest, self-confidence, and self-control to overcome these dangers. He or she needs a good sense of humor and perspective, as well as a willingness to learn and grow as the action flows.

Certainly, there is no place for the undemocratic person who refuses to let others play a meaningful part in actions and activities. Those who do not respect others and seek to grab all power and credit only hurt the organization in the long run, regardless of their individual talents. Obviously, they will not help develop the potential of those around them. While they may be brilliant and charismatic, they will not help create the collective leadership and broad-based participation so necessary for organizational growth. Additional characteristics that undermine these goals are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, other forms of prejudice, unquestioned allegiance to politicians, lack of commitment or resolve, limited time, timidity, undependability, insensitivity, and dishonesty.

Organizations with the broadest base of participation usually develop the best leaders and, in turn, those leaders help increase membership involvement. Existing leaders and organizers have the responsibility for expanding the leadership core and motivating, teaching, and supporting the new people who emerge.

Developmental Methods

By building on people’s existing strengths, it is more likely that their first leadership experience will be positive and reinforcing. Then, at a later point, they can be challenged to take on new roles and responsibilities, stretching their talents and capabilities. A shared or collective form of leadership should be developed whenever possible. For instance, ACORN periodically holds special training sessions for second-line leaders. The gatherings strengthen specific skills, as well as give people a greater sense of the organization’s history and vision. Solidarity and ownership are as much an outcome of these sessions as are particular methods and tech-
niques. Members emerge more committed to the organization and energized for active roles in their own local chapters. Because training is limited to second-line leaders, new people are added to the existing leadership group.

A number of other techniques can be used to develop the abilities, skills, and confidence of emerging leaders. Involvement in recruitment activities is a particularly helpful activity, because small-scale interactions (door-knocking, home visits, one-on-ones, and housemeetings) enable new leaders to practice articulating organizational goals, describing issue campaigns, answering questions about the GCO, and persuading community members to join. Recruiters take on a teaching role, deepening their own commitment in the process of convincing others and developing a much more thorough understanding about their GCO.

Pairing new folks with established leaders in a “buddy system” gives the veterans a chance to model and mentor, while the “rookies” learn by observing their actions and absorbing their advice. In the early stages, the upcoming leaders might do little more than “shadow” their more seasoned colleagues, but over time, they can take on a variety of manageable but meaningful responsibilities that enable them to develop new capacities and skills. The process should be incremental, moving at a pace that challenges emerging leaders without overwhelming them. Their commitment and ability to follow through on assignments should be tested within a supportive environment as they move up the “leadership ladder.” As experienced leaders teach and train, their own status is elevated, often easing any reservations they may have about sharing power with the newcomers.

The more committees that exist, the more structural opportunities will be available for new leadership to develop. Nevertheless, committees that once were active sometimes continue too long after they cease to function in a dynamic, action-oriented manner. When “fossilized” structures endure, the GCO may develop a “do-nothing” reputation and lose its credibility as a viable force in the community. Ad hoc committees that can be dissolved when they stop working actively on an issue or task help prevent this problem.

For instance, within a standing housing committee (or instead of one), a GCO might form a specific action subcommittee to win an inclusionary zoning ordinance for affordable housing, another to establish a homesteading program, and a third to deal with an abandoned house. Each of the three distinct structures would appeal more directly to the self-interests of a particular constituency, increasing levels of identification and commitment. Once the issues were resolved or stalemated, the committees could be discontinued, while the organization moved on to other specific issue campaigns.

Three committees versus one also would provide more entry points for emerging leaders to get involved and take on more responsibility. The multiple subcommittee structures would increase the number of opportunities for them to hold significant organizational roles, gaining experience
and a sense of ownership in the process. Tasks such as co-chairing meetings, doing action research, giving reports, contacting the media, reaching out to possible allies, and recruiting more participants for the Action Group could be divided or rotated as appropriate.

As new leaders develop and grow, they learn individual lessons and draw their own conclusions based on their direct experience as organizational actors in these subcommittees. Others can help by working closely with these newcomers—coaching, supporting, challenging, sharing knowledge, and helping them develop critical thinking capacities. Initially, it’s essential to assess their willingness to take on additional roles and tasks at upcoming meetings, events, and actions. This usually is accomplished through one-on-one discussions. Organizers and veteran leaders need to be sensitive about how “pushy” they should be when attempting to get inexperienced members to do more work. The idea is to increase their level of involvement, but not to alienate them—to stretch their commitment and capacities without breaking their connection to the GCO.

Once developing leaders indicate a willingness to accept added responsibility, it’s essential that they be assigned new roles and tasks and prepared for their duties. Typically, GCOs divide up assignments at planning meetings and then get ready by practicing, rehearsing, and role-playing. Socratic questioning and an examination of “What if?” contingencies can be very helpful. Videotapes of similar situations or some of the GCO’s own leaders in action also can be an effective training and preparation device. In other cases, leaders with direct experience can relate their own ideas and advice. Ideally, both individual and collective objectives will be established for every action and activity. All leaders should be clear about the roles they will play and the expectations of others. The small group setting provides a safe and supportive climate for these activities, serving as an “incubator of empowerment” (Anderson, 1992).

In all instances, there should be basic discussion about goals, problems, options, expectations, and specific plans with responsibilities and roles clearly defined and accepted. Existing leaders and organizers can help develop new leaders by assessing people’s strengths, complementing them, delegating work, and helping them carry out those tasks. This includes encouraging, urging, teaching, planning, practicing, supporting, and evaluating. Those helping to develop new leaders play a role that is analogous to a coach for a sports team. They can’t play the game for another person, but they can prepare them for it and sharpen their skills. They can help new leaders think through problems and options, so that they can make adjustments and decisions accordingly.

After the planning meeting, further coaching and support should be given on a one-to-one basis. This is a time for reinforcement and confidence boosting. It’s normal for many new leaders to experience a degree of self-doubt and anxiety as the action or event draws closer. Individual role-playing and
practice of speaking parts can be helpful. Contact with veteran leaders may be reassuring. Consistent contact should be maintained and every effort made to make sure that they don’t develop “cold feet.” Their anger at injustice and self-interest in the issues being addressed usually are strong enough to insure follow-through on responsibilities.

The deepest learning takes place when people actually perform their roles and responsibilities and then reflect on the experience, engaging in praxis. The assessment process and questions described in Chapter 5 help facilitate the dialectical process of praxis that synthesizes action and reflection. Praxis enables leaders and other community members to become more analytical about a range of subjects, including the nature and dynamics of oppression, power disparities, the distribution of wealth, the root causes of the issues that confront them, the power of collective action, the motives and methods of targets and opponents, self-interest, ideology, and the social construction of reality.

A number of writers have distinguished between leadership training that simply teaches skills for grassroots activists and developing the capacity for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Burghardt, 1982; Breton, 1995; Gutierrez, 1995; Carroll and Minkler, 2000). Needless to say, organizational mileage will be much more significant when this deeper level of leadership development is infused into every aspect of a GCO’s activities, combining practical skills, personal growth, participatory competencies (Kieffer, 1984), consciousness raising, neopopulist democratic principles (Fisher, 1997), and strategies for collective empowerment. Virtually every organizational activity, event, and campaign should be utilized as a learning experience.

Morris has introduced the concept of “oppositional consciousness,” defined as a “set of insurgent ideas and beliefs constructed and developed by an oppressed group for the purpose of guiding its struggle to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of domination” (Mansbridge and Morris, 2001; Morris, 1992, p. 363). Leadership development that incorporates praxis and critical analysis of power disparities usually leads to “oppositional consciousness.” Mansbridge (2001) asserts that there are four elements in this process: (1) identification with other members of a subordinate group, (2) recognition of injustices suffered by the group, (3) opposition to those injustices, and (4) awareness that the group has a shared interest in working to ameliorate those injustices and a need for collective action.

While critical awareness and oppositional consciousness develop most directly through the praxis of issue campaigns, structured workshops, training sessions, conferences, readings, films, guest speakers, and observations of other GCOs all can and should be utilized for leadership development. The organizational culture should encourage debate, discussion, critical analysis, and continual learning. The most powerful organizations will have multiple forms of leadership developed through a variety of methods.
GROUP PRODUCTS AND PROCESSES

Essentially there are two things to consider when assessing organizational development and maintenance: the outcomes or products of collective action and the group processes by which tasks are accomplished—what is produced and how those results are achieved. Clearly, the two affect one another. Successful GCOs tend to have a high level of member satisfaction. When many community members are involved in planning, carrying out, and assessing organizational actions and activities, success is more likely. Actions, meetings, and other events need to be both effective and enjoyable. People participate best when there are both tangible and psychological rewards; they need to achieve a degree of success on organizational goals and objectives, while also experiencing personal recognition, enhanced self-esteem, and stronger connections to other community members.

My own experience indicates that many leaders and organizers worry much more about accomplishing tasks than developing good group processes. This can turn people off. Organizations only have the partial commitment and involvement of their members, who have other things to do than participate in a GCO. It is critical that community members feel important, needed, and part of something special. Solidarity and spirit are more than pleasant by-products of group involvement. Maintenance and development do not turn solely on what the organization accomplishes. It is equally important how members perceive their leaders in action and how they see themselves contributing.

An organization is more than its formal structure, budget, constitution, and track record of victories. It is also the informal shared assumptions, perceptions, and expectations of its members; the values they hold; the ways they go about doing things. This is the organizational culture that helps form a GCO’s identity. Ultimately, people’s commitment depends on how they actually experience real involvement. Most organizational work takes place in small task groups. These settings can provide excellent opportunities for discussion, strategic analysis, consciousness raising, action research, planning, decision making, recruitment, leadership training, community education, negotiating, lobbying, and evaluation. A few basic guidelines for effective small-group products and processes follow.

Composition, Contracting, and Culture

The configuration of working groups within a GCO will (or at least should) vary from task to task. Core activists often will be involved simultaneously with several committees or subgroups; and the same people may play very different roles in the various groups, depending on their interest in the business at hand, available time, expertise, and
interpersonal relationships with other members. When tasks are simple and straightforward, existing research shows that five to seven people is the optimum size for effective problem solving, while twelve to fifteen participants are preferable for more complex problems (Bakalinsky, 1984). Since GCOs typically attempt to involve lots of people on most aspects of organizational work, subcommittees of five to seven people can be used creatively to gain efficiency when committees become unwieldy.

Half a century of research dating back to Redl (1942) clearly has demonstrated that it is best to avoid having only one group member along descriptive characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, age category, sexual orientation, and other relevant variables. The reason for this rule of thumb is the tendency for such individuals to be marginalized, tokenized, or scapegoated in these situations. To the extent that there is a degree of control over the composition of working groups, organizers and leaders should be sensitive to this potential problem and simply should take steps to recruit at least one more group member sharing the particular characteristic. Group composition should be reflective of the larger community, taking full advantage of the multiple perspectives that can be contributed by a diverse membership.

Once a work group is created, it’s essential for its members to agree on its basic purpose, priorities, parameters, and policies. “Contracting means reaching an agreement about why a group exists, how long it will exist, what will be expected of the members, how and whether the group will be structured formally, what will be expected of a staff person (if there is one), what a group’s relationships will be with other groups and the organization that sponsors it (if there is such an organization), which outcomes should be considered successes and which as failures, and often other matters as well” (as cited in Ephross and Vassil, 1988; Shulman, 1984; Schwartz, 1976). Essentially, contracting is the process of establishing mutual expectations among all participants.

It’s important to get these basic issues out on the table at an early stage, clarifying the group’s charge, structure, and relationship to other parts of the organization. The way that the group actually operates will become clearer over time. Committees, task forces, and boards develop their own organizational cultures, ranging from meeting times and places, attention to punctuality, food at meetings, child care, participant and staff roles, use of formal agendas, behavior in meetings, manner of interaction, gender and age dynamics, style of chairing, acceptable levels of conflict, decision-making processes, note taking, length of meetings, and follow-through on assignments.

Often these elements never are formally discussed and may not even be noticed until violated. However, group culture is very real and can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these taken-for-granted norms
usually will be within the “comfort zone” of regular in-group members, making participation pleasant and enjoyable. On the other hand, the manner in which a group operates may create severe or subtle barriers for non-members who potentially might join. These “outsiders” may take away the unintentional message that the group is a relatively closed system, controlled by a circle of insiders. Given the need for GCOs to attract new activists, this phenomenon can be a serious problem. It is critical that all organizational committees and task forces be perceived as open and inclusive to, and welcoming of, newcomers.

Nevertheless, putting this principle into practice can be challenging. Increasingly, the United States is becoming a more multicultural society. At one time, the concept of “community” was virtually interchangeable with “neighborhood.” Certain geographic areas were closely identified with particular ethnic groups. In many major cities, when a person referred to the Irish, African American, Polish, Puerto Rican, or Italian “communities,” he or she also would be talking about a distinct piece of turf. Now, ethnic communities typically transcend any one neighborhood, and the area in which a GCO organizes may have a plethora of different groups.

The growth of multiculturalism is healthy and positive, but may require special efforts for groups to establish cultures that actively embrace ethnic diversity. Significant differences may exist between ethnic groups on many of the variables listed above, such as the best times and places to hold meetings, the relative importance of punctuality, whether and when to have food (before, at, after, never) and what to serve, whether or not to allow children in meetings, behaviors and styles of interacting, and so forth. A policy or pattern that is agreeable to one group may turn off others.

These decisions and practices tend to be established by the folks in attendance at the initial meetings. Hearing no objections, they consciously or unconsciously may begin operating in a particular manner conveying a clear sense of style and substance that may be inviting or off-putting to potential members, depending on variables such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, or age. While the development of group culture is inevitable and has many benefits, including the fostering of cohesiveness, it is essential that the most influential members be sensitive to the messages being communicated.

Group culture is socially constructed and should be seen as a work in progress rather than a finished product. There should be a conscious effort to establish an inclusive culture that recognizes, validates, and celebrates diversity. Yet, it is also essential to establish sufficient cohesion for the group to hang together and jell. Ideally, team building will take place, a sense of “we-ness” will develop, and the members will experience a measure of pleasure and pride as participants, but not at the expense of identification with and loyalty to the overall grassroots community organization.
Decision Making

The act and art of making good group decisions is a prime example of the need to balance task effectiveness with participatory democratic processes. An inefficient process usually produces a less than satisfactory decision, but a “rush to judgment” almost guarantees a product that will not be widely and deeply embraced. GCOs should develop sound and sensitive operating procedures that are relatively consistent across all committees and task forces.

Community members will make better decisions when problems are approached systematically and analytically. The first step in the process should be defining the situation clearly and agreeing on the task at hand. For instance, the fundraising committee might be meeting to decide what to do next. One member might argue that the group should make a plan for raising its total of $15,000. Another might want to focus on doing an event in the next month that could raise $2,500. A third might be concerned with involving more members in the committee’s work. A fourth might want to plan a good social event that concentrated more on building spirit and solidarity than raising big money. At the outset, the group would have to prioritize its goals and agree on the problems to be tackled.

Next, it would make sense to list the various alternatives from which the committee could choose. Using the “brainstorming technique,” all options could be listed without evaluating their individual merit. This helps get all the possibilities out on the table without getting bogged down in discussion of any one point. Let’s assume the committee has decided to plan an event that could involve lots of members as workers while raising at least $2,500. Suggestions include a carnival, banquet, raffle, auction, dance, ad book, and a car wash.

After all alternatives have been listed, evaluations can begin. The car wash and dance might be rejected quickly by the group as being unable to yield the targeted amount of money. The ad book might be deferred to the annual convention, while the auction and carnival might be seen as too ambitious for this particular group at this time. After weighing all pros and cons, the options might be narrowed to holding a banquet or doing a raffle. Some mechanism would be needed for making a decision. Expecting the chairperson to make a unilateral decision as the group’s official leader clearly is not acceptable, and certainly a vocal minority should not be allowed to railroad through a decision by yelling the loudest. Ideally, the group would decide either by voting or through consensus.

Voting is the quickest and surest way to get a clear decision. A formal vote may be necessary for official policy decisions, such as raising the membership dues, joining a coalition, endorsing a piece of legislation, changing bylaws, or electing officers. Voting may be the best mechanism for reaching decisions and moving the group forward when fundamental
disagreements exist. Often, it is the only means to break a logjam when different factions refuse to budge on a particular position. But there also are liabilities, since someone clearly will lose; and the losers may become angry or withdrawn, failing to commit themselves to the majority decision or plotting to even the score with adversaries. As a result, a less than enthusiastic mandate for the decisions made by voting may be in place.

Consensus eliminates this problem, because everyone agrees and, hopefully, feels good about the decision. This helps insure high commitment and follow-through on responsibilities. Frequently, a consensus develops quite naturally as group members discuss and debate various courses of action. A formal vote may or may not be required, but in such situations, it is almost an afterthought. However, when a group employs consensus to resolve more complex or controversial issues, a major time commitment may be required, so that everyone’s views can be expressed fully and agreement is reached. There is a danger of becoming bogged down in endless debate and developing an orientation that is “more talk than action.” The opposite phenomenon, identified as “groupthink” by Janis (1972), may occur when participants get caught up in the excitement of a premature consensus, suspend their critical thinking, and fail to challenge the momentum of a dominant, but flawed, decision.

A variation of consensus is the compromise, where no one party gets entirely what it wants, but everyone feels that he or she can support the decision. Compromises seldom satisfy many people and often result in only limited commitment to decisions. Nevertheless, they help avoid “win-lose” situations in which defeated parties become alienated and disengaged. The operative guideline for most small working groups holds that it is usually preferable to reach consensus whenever possible, perhaps followed by a formal vote whenever it is useful to have an “official” decision. When consensus is not feasible, compromises may be less divisive than “all-or-nothing” votes, although individual circumstances will dictate the optimal decision-making method. In all instances, the goal is an informed, wise decision made through an inclusive, participatory process.

Membership and Leader Roles

Small-group members should be willing to take responsibility, contributing their knowledge, abilities, and skills as needed. Good participation entails sharing ideas, decisions, work, and credit with one another to mesh into a team effort. Participants need to get the message that their opinions are valuable and their help is appreciated. Nevertheless, new people should not be overwhelmed with work at their first sign of interest. They need to establish mutual confidence and trust with other members. Someone needs to provide them training, support, and feedback for their efforts. Essentially, they should be phased in around their own self-
interests and strengths, actively involved in nonthreatening group discussion, and constructively encouraged to take on more responsibility at a reasonable pace.

Leaders can play a key role in drawing new people in and improving group processes. Rather than asking general questions, they can make a point of seeking personal opinions from different individuals without unduly putting them on the spot. Techniques such as brainstorming can protect people’s ideas from immediate judgmental assessments. Instead of scolding their colleagues for lack of participation and failure to take responsibility, leaders can make constructive suggestions for needed tasks and possible people to do them. Where apathy exists, smaller subgroups may be formed to help stimulate more active involvement. Leaders can provide active listening, constructive feedback, advice, and support; they can serve as role models, mentors, and coaches, engaging the membership by different means and methods.

In a classic study, Robert Bales (1970) identified two distinct types of leadership roles in task-oriented groups: instrumental (product) leaders who manage the movement forward to accomplish concrete goals and objectives, and socio-emotional (process) leaders who are concerned with members’ feelings, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and subjective experiences. Bales found that both types of leadership were crucial components of productive, stable groups, but that one person seldom filled both roles. My personal experience certainly bears this out. Typically, one or two people take primary responsibility for making sure that a group stays on point, gets through the agenda, makes the requisite decisions, assigns responsibilities for tasks outside the meeting, and starts planning its next steps. And, very often, other folks bring a card for someone who is out sick, remember another member’s birthday, help soothe hurt feelings when tempers flare, or reach out to a newcomer who hangs back. This phenomenon certainly underscores the rationale for multiple forms of leadership and shared models for exercising it.

Frequently, leaders’ task and process functions will blend, as when they clarify, reframe, synthesize, summarize, expand on the ideas of others, or help make the connection to what previously was said. Sometimes they must take the initiative and lead by example, modeling behavior and standards for their followers. In other instances, they should enable, facilitate, and allow different people to show the way. While their own knowledge and opinions will be key, they should take care that others do not simply defer to their views. Ownership and investment will be furthered when a range of different people get to play an active role. The best leaders will improve group process by constantly attempting to motivate and energize their colleagues to do more.

Leaders also must be able to deal with problematic members whose behavior threatens the group process. Aggressive, dominating people,
ideologues, and extremists need to be handled firmly but fairly and prevented from controlling the group. Folks who tend to talk too much, stray off the point, or gossip about their colleagues need to be centered and focused. Those who negatively block discussion or disrupt it by clowning cannot be allowed to undermine overall progress. And members should not be permitted to turn the group into their own personal platform for presenting individual problems, insecurities, interests, and pet peeves.

At any point in time, many different group dynamics are at work. Ephross and Vassil (1988) have developed a particularly useful concept that they call “quadrifocal vision,” which calls for the simultaneous awareness and “focus on individual group members, subgroups, the group as a whole, and the place of the group in the organization of which it is a part” (74). The authors make a convincing argument that none of these four levels should be ignored, and that the different elements will move periodically from the background to the foreground and then back again. Leaders, staff, and experienced group members all need to be aware of these dynamics and act accordingly.

For instance, it’s important to be sensitive to individuals who may be shy, disaffected, angry, or preoccupied with personal concerns. Subgroups always are present and fall on a continuum from supportive of the leadership through indifferent and detached to outright hostile. Members of the working group may be in multiple subgroups concurrently, based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability, kinship or friendship networks, homeowner/tenant status, political orientation, occupation, education, geography, and a host of other dimensions. Obviously, it is essential to be attuned to the group as a whole, and it is critical to never lose sight of how the working group fits into the larger GCO.

Conflict

It is also generally healthy to allow group conflicts and disagreements to surface naturally. Maintaining too rigid control and suppressing all controversy only proves counterproductive in the long run. Usually things work out best when there is open discussion of differences and conflict is normalized. Power struggles, factions, hidden agendas, and disputes are inevitable; competition may increase at different stages of the group’s growth.

Leaders need to help the group work through such difficulties, maintaining fairness and evenhandedness in the process. While there may be internal problems, it is essential not to let divisions become public and exploitable by opponents. And resolving these conflicts requires a good sense of timing. At times, nothing should be done, while in other cases, quick, assertive intervention will be necessary. Too often there is a tendency to focus on the personalities of the key actors, rather than their self-interests
and structural positions. As the saying goes, “Where you stand is where you sit.” Leaders may be called on to mediate disputes, offer compromises, reframe “win-lose” disagreements, or otherwise reduce bad feelings and defuse explosive situations. These are difficult tasks requiring active listening, interactive skills, consensus building, sensitivity, and honesty.

Successful resolution will be more possible with good communication and ample opportunities for feedback. Whether it be written information via newsletters, fact sheets, agendas, and minutes, or word-of-mouth contact through phone trees, doorknocking, housemeetings, and building captains, good communication is essential. It helps build knowledge, trust, commitment, and solidarity. It is through GCO members’ feedback to their leaders that plans are tested and changed. More importantly, feedback gives rank-and-file members a sense of their importance and power. It builds ownership and control at the most basic level. Community members are able to play a direct role in determining their own future. And that’s what organizing is all about.

**CONDUCTING SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS**

One real test of a GCO’s leaders is their ability to organize productive, participatory, efficient meetings for a variety of purposes, such as planning, recruitment, information sharing, decision making, ratification, elections, actions, negotiations, training, fundraising, and evaluation. Many of these gatherings will be relatively small, such as those held for committees, task forces, officers, housemeetings, and training workshops. Others will be large assemblies for general membership, coalitions, conventions, public hearings, social functions, media events, and action meetings.

All meetings should be lively and as much fun as possible, involving all participants in significant discussions, decisions, and roles. Good meetings should build excitement and a sense of collective identity. Like actions, they are a primary arena through which people experience the organization and their collective power. When skillfully led, they should draw out ideas from new people and plug those folks into positions of real responsibility.

Organizations such as ACORN hold neighborhood chapter meetings on a regular monthly basis. The time, date, and place are institutionalized, for instance, 7:30 P.M. on the first Tuesday of the month at St. Mary’s Church. Planning committee meetings precede each neighborhood meeting, giving the leadership a chance to prepare a tight agenda and think through the options for action. The regular schedule helps foster stability and continuity.

Nevertheless, there’s often a tendency for groups to meet when it’s not really necessary. Too many meetings can cause burnout and turn off the membership. Most people really don’t enjoy going to meetings unless there’s a compelling reason to do so. The meeting size also should be appropriate
for the task at hand, reflecting the participants’ self-interest in its purpose and the unique contribution that each person can make. The largest meetings should be reserved for actions, social events, conventions, elections, and those occasions when the membership needs to ratify the suggestions of a smaller body. Generally, these major turnout events will be preceded by a number of smaller meetings to design and plan the upcoming gathering.

A large group never should gather simply to have a vague, general discussion. In fact, big meetings are not even suited for complex decision making. The high numbers usually will be unwieldy and frustrating for all concerned. And given that such large turnouts may sap organizational resources, as well as discourage further participation, they may even be counterproductive. Many tasks can be handled best by committees or subgroups, rather than the full organization. Phone calls, newsletters, or smaller committee meetings often are sufficient for passing on information, unless there is potential for major controversy.

And meetings are not a cure-all for reaching positive consensus. They won’t create automatic support for a proposed decision or action. The group setting reinforces behavior both positively and negatively. Holding a large meeting to resolve a tricky and controversial issue may be an exercise in organizing a divisive fiasco. When agreement is lacking on a “hot-button issue,” it’s important to meet individually with key stakeholders, followed by a small gathering to find common ground and resolve the most toxic points of contention.

Good meetings (like actions) should be planned carefully, with maximum input from those likely to participate. The attendees’ interests and issues should be dealt with seriously and incorporated into any decisions and plans. Their active involvement should be structured into the larger event in a meaningful way, so as to increase ownership and control. It is important to set clear goals for any meeting, then to divide the crucial tasks and responsibilities in order to increase participation while capitalizing on the members’ strengths and abilities.

Ninety percent of the work should be done prior to the event itself. There is nothing magical about holding successful meetings. Think of the good ones you have attended. A tremendous amount of advance work and planning is necessary. Organizers or experienced leaders should work with key individuals both before and after formal planning sessions. It’s a matter of encouraging folks and determining what they are willing to do before going into the planning meeting and then following up to support them in carrying out their assignments effectively. Large meetings can provide an invaluable testing ground for new leaders, challenging their skills and demonstrating their abilities to others. It’s important that there be a conscious effort to split up the tasks among those willing and able to take on responsibility.
It is also crucial that solid work go into building attendance for the main event. The same recruitment methods described in Chapters 3 and 5 will apply—face-to-face contact, reminder phone calls, and reinforcing forms of communication. Clearly, the time and place of the meeting affect who can attend. The time should be convenient for the greatest number of people, with every attempt being made not to exclude any one faction of the Action Group. The meeting place should be familiar to the constituency, a place where they feel comfortable. Where divisions exist within the organization, the site should be as neutral as possible. Ideally, the meeting should be in a central location that most people can reach by walking; there should be clear parking directions, if folks are driving.

The size of the meeting hall should be consistent with the expected attendance. The goal is to have a slightly crowded room with all seats filled. Gymnasiums, rooms with fixed chairs, and other sites that limit flexibility to adjust to declining or escalating attendance should be avoided if possible. Some places may have several rooms of various sizes that can be used according to the group’s needs. Volunteers will have to make sure that people fill in the seats in the first few rows—often there’s a tendency for people to avoid these seats. One objective is to make sure that no empty chairs will be noticeable in newspaper photos or on TV news coverage.

A number of mechanical and logistical tasks or “pieces” are necessary if a meeting (or action) is to go well. Human nature can be unpredictable. The unexpected often happens at meetings, but most physical pieces can be controlled. Yet, far too often good meetings are seriously disrupted by mechanical errors. I have heard of meetings of more than 300 people (most of them newcomers to the organization) where the sign-in sheet was lost, leaving no efficient way to contact the attendees for future actions. I have seen sound systems that were supposed to work, but did not. I once saw 400 senior citizens among a crowd of over 700 leave in the middle of an action meeting, because the fan was broken and they were too hot. Concessions and promises that were “taped” have been missed, because someone forgot to turn over the cassette. Slide shows have fallen victim to a blown bulb, slides out of order, electricity cutoff when the lights were turned out, and endless delays while someone tried to line up the screen or find an extension cord or a phone book to prop up the projector. I could go on.

There is absolutely no excuse for any of the above failures. Murphy’s Law states, “If something can go wrong, it will.” This is the time to anticipate and prepare for the kinds of problems likely to emerge at the larger meeting. Leaders and organizers need to plan for the worst and have contingencies, backups, and extras for everything. Roles and assignments should be divided carefully without tying up top leaders with small but important details. Some things will have to be done prior to the meeting, others during it and a few after it’s all over. Someone should coordinate logistics and have a list of all the tasks and the people responsible for performing
them (see Staples, Chapter 7). A system of group accountability should be established to help insure that everyone follows through on their specific pieces.

These responsibilities should be assigned at the planning meetings preceding the primary event. Decisions about whether to provide transportation and childcare also should be made at that time. Commitments to do so should not be made lightly. If rides are offered, it’s important to line up enough volunteer drivers. There is no mileage in leaving angry people waiting on their doorstep for a ride that never comes. And while the promise of childcare may attract more people to the meeting, the quality of this service needs to be first-rate. Otherwise, parents will be worried and upset, and the kids may disrupt the meeting. Good childcare requires supervision by a sufficient number of competent people who know how to deal with kids of all ages. It should be done in a separate room away from the meeting. Care providers should have specific activities, equipment, and snacks available for the children. Those planning the meeting must be sure that when this service is offered, it can be delivered as promised. If not, those responsible better take care and cover!

The planning group should develop a written agenda and have it available for distribution well before the meeting. This is the official plan, listing things to be done, decisions to be made, information to be given, and the individuals taking a leadership role. A mix of people should handle the different parts of the agenda, and backups should be ready to step in where needed. Since those who accept responsibility are more likely to attend, breaking up the tasks also will help increase the turnout. Anyone with a speaking role should prepare carefully beforehand and have a clear sense of what they hope to accomplish. The overall plan should be realistic and not overly ambitious. Most meetings should not exceed one and a half to two hours. Time limits next to specific items will help control the pace and focus the discussion; actual time benchmarks will be even better (e.g., 7:40: Fundraising Committee Report; 7:50: Voter Registration Update; 8:00: Discussion about New Youth Center; and so on).

The order of the agenda topics also will be important. Quick reports and informational announcements can be placed at the beginning. This helps boost morale, as meeting participants see good progress being made as the group sails through the first few agenda items. Longer reports should be written and circulated beforehand with a short oral summary at the meeting. Where decisions are required, several explanatory sentences should be placed on the agenda so that attendees have a chance to consider the matter and get ready for discussion. Leaders should be prepared to list clear options with pros and cons, frequently making recommendations for decisions and actions.

Generally, the most controversial and time-consuming items should not be left for the end of the agenda. Since meetings often tend to run longer
than planned, this can result in squeezing discussion and rushing or even preventing decisions. Instead, it is best to deal with tricky topics right in the middle of the agenda. Participants’ interest and energy will be higher at this point, late arrivals and early departees will be present, and full discussion will be possible. This also leaves room for open discussion of “new business” at the end of the meeting. Ideally, the agenda should end on a high note with some specific resolution for further action. The meeting should lead to action, not just talk. This should be a paramount consideration for those who develop the agenda.

Besides developing the plan for the meeting itself, the agenda also helps specify the tasks that have to be done before the main event. Responsibilities should be fixed, so that there is a clear sense of who is doing what and when this will be done. Someone at the planning meeting needs to make sure that people follow through on their promises and that all the preliminary pieces fall into place. Where intragroup controversy is anticipated, there should be a concerted effort to reach out to likely participants, involving them in plans for the meeting and adjusting the agenda accordingly. This step will build their sense of ownership, while simultaneously helping the leadership stay more closely in touch with the membership. This period between the planning and large meetings often is crucial for making alterations, tightening things up, and laying the foundation for later success.

When the meeting does take place, a few people need to arrive early for setup and welcoming duties. Everyone who attends should sign in, including opponents and guests. It’s important that there be literature for the early arrivals and comfortable seating with good lighting. New people should be made to feel welcome, have an opportunity to join at the door, and be integrated into the group. Attendees should be able to see and hear clearly, and the setup should facilitate participation and involvement in the meeting.

The starting time should be slightly flexible. Generally, many people arrive a little bit late. It does no good to start a 7:30 P.M. meeting precisely on time if people still are streaming in the door. On the other hand, it’s important not to keep those who arrived on time waiting too long. This practice also sets a bad precedent for other meetings, actions, and activities. Therefore, meetings should start as close to the announced time as possible, but should allow for some short commonsense delays of up to fifteen minutes.

Someone should be assigned to deal with the latecomers and give them written materials or a short verbal summary without disrupting the meeting. At large meetings, late arrivals can be briefed just outside the meeting room, while in smaller settings, the chair can summarize for the whole group as the newcomers settle in. When targets will be confronted at action meetings or accountability sessions, the proceedings usually should start thirty minutes prior to their arrival, so the crowd can be briefed, prepared, and “fired up” for action.
As the meeting begins, it is important to review the agenda and, under some circumstances, even to seek formal approval. The GCO’s basic ground rules and procedures should be explained briefly. Formal parliamentary procedure generally should be avoided. It is too rigid and cumbersome, and often interferes with free discussion. However, there should be clear commonsense processes for making motions and amendments and voting on them. The optimum ground rules will provide order and consistency for these processes without hindering the free flow of ideas, excitement, and fun.

At formal meetings, lengthy speakers can be controlled in a number of ways. Certainly, the written time limits on the agenda will help, and speakers can be reminded of the timeline before they begin. Someone sitting nearby also can signal them if they start to exceed their cutoff point. Often the chair can intercede by asking a question and pointing out that others in the audience need time to raise their own questions. In more extreme cases, when the speaker is an opponent or politician, someone may need to use an egg timer or other signaling device. This helps depersonalize the move to limit the speaker. Of course, in action meetings, the GCO usually will want to personalize and pressure the target. The floor team can involve the rest of the crowd in demanding that the speaker cut the rhetoric and deal with the issue at hand.

The chairperson has the responsibility of moving the group through the agenda, focusing discussion, and involving people actively in decisions. A chairperson must put personal issues and feelings aside and function in the interests of the entire group. On the occasions when he or she wants to advocate strongly for a particular position on a very controversial matter, the chair can step down from the role during deliberations on that agenda item. The co-chair or other designated substitute can take over and preside impartially, while the regular chair is free to engage in the debate just like any other member. Once the agenda item is finished, the parties can return to their former roles.

Chairpeople should treat everyone fairly, facilitating group discussion and increasing participation by drawing out the quiet folks, while firmly handling overly aggressive members. It is important to allow differences to surface and to make sure that all sides have an opportunity to air their opinions, without any one person or faction controlling discussion. The chairperson also needs to keep the group centered on the agenda item currently being considered, structuring discussion to move from clarifying information through options and on to definite decisions. This takes a good sense of timing—knowing when to expand and explain and when to proceed ahead toward resolution.

At various times, a chairperson should summarize the group’s progress and point the way for the next steps in the process. However, chairs also should seek some level of agreement from the overall group and not impose
their own definitions on situations. It is not sufficient to know where to move next and how best to solve particular problems. Chairpeople also must be sensitive to group members’ feelings, and draw on their expertise whenever possible. All this requires a careful balance between participation and control, attention to group processes, and task-oriented leadership.

The interplay of these variables is most apparent when an *action meeting* is held by a large group to confront a target. Demands can be made by the leadership at the front or from key members sitting in the audience. Either way, the crowd should be involved as participants who actively help apply maximum pressure on the opponent sitting on the “hot seat.” Meeting attendees never should be made to feel like passive spectators. Often, the demands can be listed on poster board with “yes” and “no” boxes, which are checked as the target responds.

Obviously, the crowd can help extract concessions by supporting the demands, giving personal testimony, chanting, and otherwise mixing it up with the target. Unsatisfactory responses can lead to an immediate direct action, as when the organization marches over to the mayor’s house after growing impatient with an uncooperative appointed bureaucrat. In other cases, the target may be “dismissed,” after which the leadership suggests a more militant direct-action tactic. All action meetings should be feisty, lively affairs where members directly can experience their collective power, rather than simply watching their leaders take on opponents.

As any meeting comes to an end (timeliness is very important here), the chairperson needs to define and explain what comes next and how this will be accomplished. Ideally, the next event should be scheduled right at that time, so that the maximum number of people have both input in and information about the decision. Follow-up responsibilities should be divided clearly and publicly whenever possible. Everyone should leave with a clear sense of achievement and mission. It is not too early to start preparing and organizing for the next event. However, all this should be done amongst some celebration, fun, and socializing as the meeting comes to an end. People should relax, have a good time, and enjoy themselves.

Often, but not always, there is a tendency for the top leaders to stay the longest, discussing the results and planning for the future. Systematic evaluation (discussed in Chapter 5) may be undertaken at this point, or simply scheduled for a future meeting. Regardless, it is a good time for the leadership to begin reflecting on what happened, their own roles in it, and what should be done the same way or differently in the future. It is important to create an atmosphere in which success can be celebrated and constructive criticism can be made in a nonthreatening manner. Leaders should emerge recommitted and energized for the next step in the organizing process.

There also should be reminders and follow-up support for those who volunteer for various tasks before or at the next event. Often, a written list of
these responsibilities helps both to remind the volunteers and to tighten up their commitment to follow through on their assignments. A record that everyone in the organization can see does wonders for helping members keep the promises they have made. It is also important to communicate with the new people who came to the meeting. Their impressions and ideas should be sought, and they should be recruited to come to the next event, perhaps to play an even greater role. Finally, someone should contact those who were expected to attend but missed the meeting. The person should let them know what they missed and start organizing them to turn out next time. One thing is for sure: there always will be another meeting.

**MAKING CHANGE WITH COINS**

It has become fashionable for a broad array of public and private sector organizations to assert their commitment to community involvement and empowerment. The list includes hospitals, neighborhood health centers, social service bureaucracies, institutions of higher learning, and public and private schools. Yet, despite a proliferation of partnerships, collaborations, community initiatives, citizen advisory boards, and task forces, the rhetoric of community and consumer empowerment often far exceeds the day-to-day reality experienced by community members who interact with these institutions. Some organizations prefer to “talk the talk” rather than “walk the walk” of genuine power sharing. Others have a sincere desire to work in partnership, but lack the knowledge, skills, cultural competence, and organizational resources to do so effectively. Regardless of intent, clumsy efforts to work collaboratively with grassroots community organizations can leave members and leaders feeling like they’ve been tokenized and co-opted, functioning as “junior partners,” rather than as equals in a joint endeavor.

When this happens, GCOs usually react to the situation, demanding institutional changes in attitudes and behaviors. While relations between organized community members and the institutions they utilize can be expected to require continual adjustment as the parties interact, GCOs should not settle for relationships of perpetual confrontation. It is reasonable and realistic to insist that organizations providing health care, education, and human services operate with a significant degree of institutional responsibility and accountability to the communities where they sit and the consumers/users whom they serve. When genuine two-way relationships of mutual respect exist, authentic partnership is possible, paving the way for productive community development programs, projects, and activities.

Institutions that become sufficiently responsive and answerable to communities and consumers essentially are accepting their appropriate
service obligation, which Webster’s New World Dictionary defines as a “contract, promise or moral responsibility.” An obligation is a “duty imposed legally or socially” whereby conditions and services are bound to be done. I have coined the term “COINS” to characterize “Community-Obligated Institutions” that agree to conduct themselves in a manner that is responsive and responsible to both users of services and community neighbors. The transformation to an obligatory relationship is central to this notion. These institutions are in no way “owned” or “operated” by community members. Yet they certainly have moved beyond merely being “community oriented.” They are acknowledging their moral and professional obligations to community members.

COINS can operationalize their commitment to sharing power with GCOs in four areas: decision-making structures, operating policies and procedures, programming, and staffing.

**Decision-Making Structures**

A variety of structures for making decisions provides opportunities for creating a greater measure of institutional responsibility. Both permanent standing committees as well as special ad hoc task forces offer possibilities for GCOs to sit at the table as equals with powerful organizations. Too often, however, a few individuals from the community are given seats on such committees. Frequently, these individuals are selected as “types” based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, income, or other status, rather than as representatives of organized groups. Either by accident or the design of a cynical selection process, they often turn out to be atypical of the very group they are chosen to exemplify.

At times, this happens when self-appointed “grasstips” leaders—recognized by outside authorities but neither respected nor trusted within their own communities—are designated to speak for a particular group. This is a mistake of ignorance. However, institutional arrogance also may be at work. Individuals possessing the appropriate community group characteristic, who will not raise difficult questions or challenge organizational prerogatives, may be handpicked as “window dressing.” But, even when the individuals chosen to sit on such committees are respected and resolute, if they aren’t representatives of an organized group, they speak only for themselves. Outnumbered and disconnected from a community base, they easily can be marginalized and ignored. The same holds true for organizational governance and advisory boards.

Institutions genuinely committed to community empowerment should follow four basic guidelines. First, representatives from GCOs should be given precedence over unattached individuals when various types of institutional decision-making structures are constituted. Clearly, this will help hold the relevant institution more accountable to a larger and more
representative segment of the community. Second, such representatives should comprise a large enough portion of the total seats to form a critical mass. Ideally, community representatives would hold a majority of these positions, but at a minimum, there should be a group that is large enough to avoid numerical insignificance and tokenism.

Third, representatives from GCOs should be given the requisite orientation and training, so that they can function as knowledgeable and active participants. Care should be taken to insure that these folks have a full opportunity to learn about pertinent historical and contextual information, applicable budgetary matters, protocol at meetings, and decision-making processes. Finally, meetings should be “community friendly” regarding time, place, transportation, childcare, food, degree of formality, and use of professional jargon. It is critical that powerful institutions demonstrate their sincere willingness to reach out to community groups in a manner that fosters mutual respect and egalitarianism.

Operating Policies and Procedures

The ways in which institutions operate offer additional possibilities for power sharing with grassroots community organizations. For instance, the types of strong participatory decision-making structures described above do not ensure that the actual decisions made will be vital and consequential. Rather, the import and significance of the issues addressed are functions of organizational readiness to entrust these judgments to the appropriate body. Too often, structures that include significant representation from community-based organizations are left to address trivial issues, while important matters never reach their agendas.

A number of guidelines help insure that institutional policies and procedures reflect a firm commitment to community-driven processes. First, a relatively decentralized management system is most consistent with a bottom-up empowerment approach. Such an organizational model affords multiple access points for community groups to have influence on truly significant institutional decisions and behaviors. Second, the institution can adopt a policy of long-range planning that incorporates a central role for community stakeholders. The willingness to involve community groups in the process of envisioning and charting the future is a fundamental test of organizational resolve and dedication to sharing power. Third, health, educational, and human services organizations need to establish policies and procedures that are culturally sensitive and geared to the needs of both individual consumers/users and organized groups. It is critical that opportunities for choices, decision-making, and action be built into a framework that emphasizes dignity and respect for community members.
Programming

Institutional programming often is the level where the rhetorical “rubber hits the road” to reality in low- and moderate-income communities. Problems will occur when there is insufficient community involvement at the key programmatic stages of assessment, design, implementation, and evaluation. Without significant participation, programs frequently will not be responsive to true community needs. Even when needs are identified accurately, a lack of community input into other phases of program development usually leads to grievous errors of both omission and commission.

Guidelines for institutional responsibility logically follow each step of the program development process. First, consumers/users and community members should be engaged fully in assessing needs as well as assets in the community. Indeed, the ability to draw on community resources is central to a genuine partnership approach. Second, the community should be involved very directly in program design. The expertise born of community members’ lived experience is a tremendous strength that can contribute immeasurably to designing effective programs. Active roles for consumers/users and GCOs should be built in wherever possible, including both mutual aid and self-advocacy where relevant.

Third, implementation is much more likely to be successful when there is a significant level of community buy-in and ownership. Such investment is a product of full community involvement. Finally, it is essential that consumers/users and community groups closely monitor and actively evaluate institutional programs. Structures and processes for participatory evaluation should be established, making it more possible both to improve programs and to hold powerful organizations more accountable.

Staffing

The general principle holds that staff should reflect the demographic characteristics of the community served as closely as practical, given the qualifications and skills required for the particular positions. Institutional congruence along this dimension helps engender trust with community members and improves the likelihood that GCOs will be willing to collaborate on a range of projects. Where the disparity between institutional staff and community members is considerable, possibilities for successful working partnerships often will be limited.

A simple guideline is that institutions should maximize opportunities to recruit current or former consumers/users and community members wherever appropriate and possible. Community-based nonprofits may be an excellent resource for identifying such individuals, helping overcome the familiar excuse, “We’d love to hire someone from the community, but we just can’t
find anyone qualified for the job.” Where specialized skills are required, institutions should develop training programs, furnish scholarships for professional education, provide mentoring, and offer other supports as needed to attract and retain staff members from the community. Similar to the circumstances with committees and boards discussed above, it is essential to have a “critical mass” of these community members in order to prevent isolation and alienation.

Beyond employing individuals from the community, institutions can demonstrate their willingness to share power by generating opportunities for residents and consumers/users to participate both in the hiring and the evaluation of staff. Clearly, there is a continuum of community involvement short of the institution abrogating all authority in these matters. The guideline is to maximize the role of community members as is appropriate in the particular situation. Management should think creatively about how the community can be engaged in a significant and influential advisory capacity.

Do COINS actually exist? Why would significant numbers of hospitals, universities, health centers, human services bureaucracies, and public and private schools ever agree to a model that shifts so much power from the providers to the recipients of a wide array of goods and services? While the argument can and should be made that empowerment is a “win-win” phenomenon whereby providers gain as well as recipients, often there is a tendency for institutions to view power sharing in “win-lose” or “zero-sum” terms.

There is a host of reasons for resistance to bottom-up participation. Working with the community is labor intensive, time consuming, and often “messy.” It’s quicker and cleaner to make decisions for consumers and residents. Institutional staff often are overworked and spread thin with other responsibilities. It’s tempting to take shortcuts to act unilaterally on behalf of the community without taking the time to involve a broad base of people. Some provider professionals may not have faith and confidence in “ordinary people,” believing that community members are either unwilling or unable to participate wisely and effectively. Others may lack the competencies and skills to facilitate participatory processes.

Institutional resistance to a community-driven model may range from ignorance through avoidance to outright hostility. It is common for such organizations to employ an array of countertactics, including many of the “Seven Ds of Defense,” as they cling to their traditional ways of operating. Yet, under the right circumstances, powerful institutions will deal with the community. Two conditions are critical for this to happen. First, the community must be organized. This prerequisite is basic but essential. Second, grassroots community organizations must have sufficient leverage to apply pressure on institutional decision-makers.

While the term “empowerment” has been overused and abused by a wide variety of institutions—often in a cynical, self-serving manner—the underlying philosophical principles of this concept have led to a new em-
phasis on community collaboration and partnership, creating new rhetorical handles for GCOs to seize. Organizations in both the public and private sectors have discovered “the community,” singing the praises of consumer and resident participation. While the mainstream approach to community involvement usually is predisposed toward limited input—such as reactions to predetermined institutional decisions—nevertheless, the language of most community initiatives usually promises more of a say than those institutions are prepared to convey. Likewise, a variety of other handles linked to new empowerment-oriented pronouncements, policies, procedures, precedents, and programs enables GCOs to hold health care, human services, and educational institutions to higher levels of accountability in communities across the country.

For instance, grassroots groups have challenged the tax-exempt status of hospitals based on the failure of these organizations to carry out their charitable mission in the community. The argument is a simple one—a hospital categorized as a charitable nonprofit organization receives both public dollars and a break on its taxes; therefore, it should demonstrate how it currently is serving the public good. When hospitals conducting marketing campaigns have exaggerated their contributions to the neighborhoods which they serve, GCOs have been quick to point out the contradictions. As a result, “Community Benefit Guidelines” have been established in a number of states, requiring hospitals to produce written evidence of the concrete assistance that they provide. Examples of projects and programs include “unreimbursed free care, community health education, free preventive care or early detection screening, mobile health vans, home care not reimbursed by federal or state government, medical and clinical research directed toward the community needs specified in the (hospital’s) Plan, support for community-oriented healthcare provider training programs, new services specifically created to meet the identified community needs, expanded free/subsidized prescription drug programs, violence and domestic violence prevention” (Health Care For All, 1995, p. 5). The subsequent Community Benefits Reports, which often promise and promote a variety of community initiatives, in turn render even more handles for GCOs intent on making large health care institutions more responsible to consumers and residents.

*Neighborhood health centers*, which traditionally have been more grounded in local communities than hospitals, nevertheless also have become more sensitized to resident involvement in recent years. For example, a growing number are embracing the principles of Community-Oriented Primary Care (COPC), an approach that employs community-professional partnerships to address health issues utilizing participatory assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. A key aspect of the refined COPC model is the “cluster committee” composed of key stakeholders, including health center staff, representatives from grassroots nonprofits, providers from other health care agencies, state and local officials,
involved academicians, and other interested parties (Thomas, Cashman, and Fulmer, 1985). This group holds a series of meetings that move through the COPC process—defining and characterizing the community, engaging the community, conducting an assessment of needs and resources, developing an intervention, and monitoring and evaluating the impact of the intervention (Cashman, Fulmer, and Staples, 1994). Throughout this process, community-based organizations are at the table as full partners. COPC and variations thereof offer a particular and practical leverage mechanism for GCOs to hold neighborhood health centers to higher standards of accountability.

*Human services organizations* are most likely to espouse approaches consistent with an empowerment-helping paradigm. There are initiatives to become more consumer-led and resident-driven in social work agencies across the country, and these efforts have been well documented in a wide variety of articles, books, workshops, and conferences. Nevertheless, the empowerment rhetoric of these agencies frequently far exceeds their actual deeds. Grassroots community organizations have at their disposal multiple handles to help close the rhetoric-reality gap, including mission statements, public pronouncements, contradictions, broken promises, and successful precedents for other participatory programs. Like health care organizations, human services agencies publicly profess a set of values that make it most difficult for them to deny demands from community members determined to see that actions are consistent with official principles.

*Public and private schools* are being held to higher standards of responsibility and accountability. Both “parent involvement” and “student empowerment” are familiar refrains from kindergartens through high schools. Common themes include partnerships with families, building on community assets, promoting cultural competence, and assuring community inclusiveness (Washington, Johnson, and McCracken, 1995). “Parent centers” provide a physical space in some schools where families, children, teachers, and administrators can work together on a range of activities, including “classroom, clerical, logistical, governance, planning, fundraising, as well as assistance with special events” (Johnson, 1994). They serve as incubators of collective action by both parents and students.

In Texas, strong community organizations built by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) have established “Alliance Schools” that include parents as full partners in the educational process and “teach parents, teachers, and principals to relate to each other in new ways, to restructure their relationships before restructuring the schools they care about” (Rips, 1996). Similarly, ACORN established three public high schools in New York City in 1996: the ACORN Community High School, the ACORN High School for Social Justice, and the Bread and Roses Integrated Arts High School. These schools are dedicated to educating low-income children of color to high standards (600–800 students currently attend each), with an innovative focus
on social justice and community development. The schools have featured cooperative efforts by all stakeholders to make dramatic improvements in educational performance. Handles to change parent-student-teacher-administrator relationships include precedents such as the above initiatives, as well as legislation, poor test scores in some schools, funding crises, and a political climate of growing dissatisfaction with the educational status quo.

Finally, institutions of higher learning increasingly are being pressed to give back more to the communities where they are located. There is a wide range of ways in which colleges and universities can give support to the surrounding community. A partial list includes building more student housing, so as not to price out neighborhood residents; scholarships for local high school graduates; jobs for neighborhood residents; cash or in-kind support for local agencies; opening up cultural and educational programs to the community; allowing the use of facilities for neighborhood meetings and events; summer camps (sports, computers, music, arts, adventure, and so on); free tickets to sports events; use of sports and recreational facilities; “college-bound” programs to help prepare neighborhood kids for higher education; student volunteers; student learning projects; community/university partnerships; and sponsorship of various neighborhood events, programs, and projects.

Institutions of higher learning also are exempt from local taxes; and the concept of “payment in lieu of taxes,” entailing contributions such as those listed above, is well established. However, the quantity and quality of such assistance are very uneven. Community groups have become more aggressive in their demands for compensation from these large organizations, especially where “town and gown” issues exist regarding disruptive student behavior, inadequate parking, and housing shortages. These issues and the surrounding public furor create leverage for GCOs, along with broken promises, precedents, high-profile events at the schools, and assorted public pronouncements by elected officials and college administrators. And, very often, the educational institution will be offering courses taught from an empowerment perspective, setting the stage for handles of contradiction.

While COINS can’t be expected to fall from heaven, the guidelines, examples, and handles discussed above hold promise for making change in some aspects of the relationships between institutions and community members. Few organizations can be counted on to meet fully the idealized notion of COINS, and most will never be “in the pocket” of the community. Nevertheless, there is increased potential for GCOs to utilize persuasive campaign strategies to convince public and private sector institutions to work more inclusively, respectfully, and collaboratively with community members. A growing number of policies, programs, precedents, and procedures provide the leverage to hold health care, educational, and human service organizations more accountable. Opportunity knocks, and the handles to open the door to change are present. The key lies with a well-organized and active community.
COINS: COMMUNITY-OBLIGATED INSTITUTIONS

Health care, education, and human services organizations that operate with a significant degree of Institutional Responsibility and Accountability to the communities where they sit and the consumers/users whom they serve

Hospitals, Neighborhood Health Centers, Human Services Agencies, Public & Private Schools, and Universities & Colleges

Decision-Making Structures

Representatives from GCOs should be given precedence over unattached individuals.

Such representatives should constitute a critical mass.

GCO representatives should receive orientation and training.

Meetings should be “Community Friendly.”

Operating Policies and Procedures

Decentralized management systems are consistent with bottom-up empowerment and provide multiple access points for community groups to have influence.

Long-range planning should incorporate a critical role for community members.

Policies and procedures should be culturally sensitive, emphasizing dignity and respect for community members.

Programming

Consumers/users & community members should be engaged fully in assessing needs & assets and designing, implementing, and evaluating programs.

Staffing

Staff should reflect the demographic characteristics of the community being served as closely as practical.

Institutions should maximize opportunities to recruit current or former consumers/users and community members whenever appropriate and possible.

Institutions should maximize the role of community members in hiring and evaluating staff.
Chapter 7

“Nuts and Bolts, Some Do’s and Don’ts”
A Short Collection

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapters have covered some basic principles, methods, and techniques for developing more grassroots power. I’ve discussed fundamental organizing philosophy and goals and laid out a model for building a solid organization. I’ve examined key factors in choosing and framing issues, making strategy, and carrying out successful collective action tactics. And I’ve looked at ways to develop new leaders, broaden the base of participation, and hold the group together.

This last chapter addresses a number of specific crucial topics. Organizers and leaders should have a good working knowledge of each of these areas. Success or failure can turn on the ability to handle such matters effectively. While the list of subjects covered is by no means exhaustive, competence and skill in the following arenas are absolutely essential.

Sound research is a keystone for any issue campaign. Will Collette’s article examines the different types of research and suggests when each is appropriate. He looks at common problems in methodology and gives specific tips for getting the job done well. Mac McCreight points out that “legal strategy can either empower or undermine grassroots organizations.” He presents clear guidelines for community lawyering, using the law as leverage to complement organizing objectives.

Most community organizations attempt to have an impact on public policy in some shape or fashion. Judy Meredith and Cathy Dunham offer clear rules for influencing elected officials and conducting winning public policy campaigns. Of course, one very direct way to change public policy is to play a greater role in the electoral process. George Pillsbury’s article sorts out the do’s and don’ts of grassroots community organizations and electoral activity—what’s possible for nonprofits and
what’s not, including registration, voter education, mobilization, and endorsements.

**Information technology** can be a powerful tool for supplementing grassroots organizing, expanding possibilities for information exchange; electronic advocacy; and instant, distant, and consistent communication within or across communities. Maria Roberts-DeGennaro specifies how e-mail, the Internet, listservs, Webcasting, online flash campaigns, faxes, video-teleconferencing, and community computer networks can be used for research, administration, communication, advocacy, and organizing. Favorable **press and media coverage** often is a critical element in determining organizational success. Eric Weltman explains how community groups can define and frame their message most effectively and examines opportunities for receiving a variety of types of news coverage, including how to plan, organize, and publicize a media event.

Once a targeted decision-maker has been forced to the bargaining table, it’s imperative for a group’s leaders to be able to **negotiate** a victory. Mark Splain draws on more than thirty-five years of community and labor organizing experience to lay out ground rules for forming negotiating teams; planning, preparing, and training; and bargaining as a dialectical process. **Community-labor coalitions** are a growing phenomenon in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods across the country. Louise Simmons explains how organized labor is structured, specifies the circumstances under which these joint efforts are most useful, and gives valuable suggestions for forming, operating, and maintaining these collaborative organizing initiatives.

In fact, Terry Mizrahi and Beth Rosenthal note the increased usage of **coalitions** for a wide range of social change efforts and argue that this is a healthy and necessary development for organizing in the twenty-first century. They go on to introduce a framework for building coalitions, discuss dynamics and challenges common to these structures, and give specific instructions for managing and sustaining them. The late Tim Sampson also was committed to increasing unity among community organizations, but his article from the first edition of this book raised cautions about the tendency to form coalitions prematurely without first building a strong organizational base. His examination of “why, when, who, and how” questions about working with other organizations stands the test of time.

As money becomes tighter and tighter, more groups are turning to various forms of grassroots fundraising. Dave Beckwith has written a case study about how a neighborhood organization did systematic door-to-door recruitment to raise money through **membership dues**. The article shows how the membership drive built the organizational base and deepened the leadership’s sense of ownership. Helene O’Brien, National Field Director of ACORN, chronicles the organization’s development of sophisticated
systems for increasing financial self-sufficiency through dues and internal fundraisers. In a conversation with Madeleine Adamson, she describes mechanisms for automatically collecting dues through bank drafts, linkages to member benefits and services, and large-scale grassroots fundraisers such as bank fairs, National Cleanup Day, Slow Down Traffic Days, and highly profitable banquets.

Almost all these activities require small, medium, or large meetings, which do not work well when certain mechanical and logistical tasks are ignored. “Grab Those Details by the Tail” draws up a checklist of some of these specifics and makes suggestions about how to handle them. It may sound like a bore, but it’s a necessary chore that someone had to write about, so I did.

The articles and writers contributing to Chapter 7 represent a range of opinions and styles, but a common thread runs through each piece. Whether it be research or press coverage, lobbying or litigation, technology on the information highway or electoral activity on the street, or negotiating, coalescing, fundraising, or meeting, all activity should contribute toward and complement the building of an organizational power base. There are no shortcuts, no easy routes to power. The road is long, winding, full of bumps, and mostly uphill. These nuts and bolts are not ends in themselves. But together they can help hold together the engine of a powerful people’s machine fueled by the energy of collective action. And with a strong base in place, a community-driven process can begin organizing the grassroots to power.
RESEARCH FOR ORGANIZING

Will Collette

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Research is digging facts. Digging facts is as hard a job as mining coal. It means blowing them out from underground, cutting them, picking them, shoveling them, loading them, pushing them to the surface, weighing them, and then turning them loose on the public for fuel for light and heat. Facts make a fire which cannot be put out.

To get coal requires miners.
To get facts requires miners, too—fact miners.
The owners know what they want and get it. The workers do not know what they want and get it in the neck.

John Brophy, Pennsylvania miner, introducing his plan for public ownership of resources at the 1921 Convention of the United Mine Workers of America.

Years later, when coal miners and their families in the famous Harlan County, Kentucky, strike were finally able to prove that Judge F. Byrd Hogg was a coal operator, it gave them the will to win. Judge Hogg was on the verge of breaking their strike. He imposed injunctions limiting the number of picketers and the location of picket lines to the point where picketing was less than useless—it was dispiriting. He threw miners and their wives in jail for violating his orders. He abused the strikers in open court. He was a coal operator, the miners knew, because he looked like a coal operator, smelled like one, and certainly acted like one. To carry on, they had to prove it.

And they did, by searching property records and incorporation papers, and by talking to people in their own as well as neighboring counties. Finally, after weeks of digging, they discovered that Judge Hogg owned a mine several counties away. They secured copies of the incorporation papers and the next time they clashed with Judge Hogg in his Harlan County courtroom, they displayed the papers for all to see. Judge Hogg was excused from the case and was replaced by a more impartial magistrate.

Research for organizing is, indeed, a powerful force, creating a “fire which cannot be put out.” Yet, research is not what wins in organizing. Let’s dispel the myth that “information is power.” Information and the research to get it are tools an organized group of people can use to GET power.
With the dawn of the Internet age, we must increasingly master information technology in every aspect of life, no less so in organizing. Organizing research made the quantum leap to embrace new technology. (Information technology moves so quickly that it’s almost futile to put out print versions of research guides that cite research resources. If I were to list my favorite Internet resources today and come back to it a year from now, the chances are the list would be different and the terms and costs for use of those resources would have changed.) Despite advances in research technology, many organizations still handle this vital task awkwardly. Organizations can get more out of research not only by investing in computer technology and research methodology, but also by better understanding the purpose and uses of research.

**WHY DO RESEARCH?**

- **Planning.** The more you know about the strengths and weaknesses of your target—and yourself—the better your strategy, the better your intelligence, and the smarter your tactics will be.

- **Focus.** Mapping out fruitful areas for recruitment of new members.

- **Power analysis.** Research can help you understand who is aligned with whom, who has power, and who doesn’t. Organizers need to know what it will take to win.

- **Targeting.** Organizers need to know who has the power to give them what they want. Organizers who understand organizing research use that research to map out “relationships of power.” When you understand the web of social, financial, and political relationships that your “target” values, you can make smarter decisions about where to focus your efforts.

- **Gathering facts that support your position.** As you gather and evaluate information, you can refine the way you present an issue, clarifying and sharpening the focus.

- **Gathering facts that weaken your opponent’s position.** “Opposition research” has evolved into an art form.

- **Dispelling fear and doubt and building confidence.**

- **Getting people angry** and, often, gaining the evidence you need to build public outrage.

- **Building leadership and getting people involved.** When organizing research is made a group project, participating members gain confidence and self-respect. They gain a greater sense of “ownership” of the issue and the manner in which the issue is handled when they have done the research themselves.
TYPES OF RESEARCH

Organizing research breaks down into several key elements. Research is an ongoing process that occurs before you begin organizing, throughout each organizing drive or issue campaign, and later, as you consolidate your gains and move on. Important forms of organizing research are listed below.

Community Analysis

This research involves the collection and analysis of details about the community in which you are organizing. Key items include physical geography; population demographics; “mapping out,” patterns of community services; identification of potential allies and resources; pinpointing leaders and potential leaders; spotting issues; dividing the community up according to such patterns as income, race, and ethnicity; and identifying major business or industrial centers. The list may be expanded or contracted according to conditions in your community. Computer-assisted technologies like geographic information system (GIS) make it easier to do more in-depth community analyses.

Power Structure Analysis

The key to this analysis is gathering the information needed to graph the relationships of power in your community. It is essential to know who your community’s power brokers are in general, and to do the same for every issue your group selects. For each issue, there are two key questions: (1) “Who is responsible for causing the problem?” and (2) “Who has the power to solve the problem?” These questions should be investigated separately, even though the answers, in many cases, may be the same. As part of this graphing process, power structure analysis involves drawing a picture of the web of relationships among the key decision makers and targets. Some researchers call this the “wheel of power” (more on this later). In addition to formal, easily discerned lines of command or control, the researcher also must factor in informal power relationships. Your organizing target may have a formal, legal responsibility to report to the next person within an agency or company, but may be far more under the sway of a powerful politician or business person whose name will never appear in the official table of organization.

Targeting Research

This is a research form that is partly community analysis and mostly power structure analysis. When you select a “target,” you are choosing the
person your group will “attack.” This choice is pure strategy and involves a number of questions: Can this person give us what we want? Do we have enough power or “leverage” to make this person do what we want? If we fail to “win” with this person, do we have any recourse? Can we find and reach this person effectively? Opposition research—that is, digging up dirt—is a key part of targeting research, but more importantly, an organizer must understand the target’s web of relationships.

This chart shows the web of relationships that a building trades organizer would examine to plan an organizing strategy on a construction contractor. Every organizing target has its own set of important relationships that can give the organizer key information that means the difference between winning and losing. As mentioned earlier, some researchers call this type of diagram the “Wheel of Power.” That is because every business or agency not only needs a set of relationships, but also needs those relationships to be in balance and to function smoothly. Organizers try to figure out where they can use the power they have to throw those relationships out of balance. If you disturb the balance enough, you win.

Fact Gathering and Analysis

This is an ongoing process. In organizing, this kind of research includes studying corporate annual reports or profit and loss statements, analyzing statistics, looking at budgets, reading newspapers and saving potentially useful news clips, and maintaining files on important programs, people, businesses, and so on. The Internet makes this work a lot easier, but beware of too much reliance on the Web—combine Internet research with human intelligence and old-fashioned shoe leather research.

Sometimes we know what kind of fact-gathering analysis we need to do, such as obtaining information on laws, regulations, or budgets that relate to the ongoing campaign. Other times, however, our fact gathering is hardly more than a fishing expedition or insurance against some future need for information in a yet-to-be-launched campaign.

Monitoring

This is a form of fact gathering and analysis that occurs most commonly after, but sometimes before, an organizing effort. Precampaign monitoring can help to establish whether or not a “target” is behaving badly as suspected and to decide when an issue is “ripe” enough to generate broad public interest. After the party is over, we know from experience that we can count on our opponents to “backslide,” to renege on agreements and concessions they have made. If we are to maintain credibility
with our friends as well as our enemies, we must be able to determine when that happens and take action. We also conduct postcampaign monitoring for the benefit of leaders and membership who have a right to know that their work resulted in a lasting change.

**Putting Research to Use**

Each type of organizing research has practical, strategic applications. These are some common examples:

- **You can use community analysis to target the best neighborhoods for organizing.** You can spot potential issues that can be used to start discussions on the doorstep. (Example: “I noticed the closest fire station is three miles away across the river.”)

- **You can use power structure analysis to pick your shots.** Most organizers want to win, but winning is not the only consideration. If a win
comes too easily, it may leave the organization ill-prepared to deal with a tougher target. But if you pick a tougher target, you still want to make sure you can win. Thus, targeting is a delicate balance of strategic choices usually shaped by strategic research.

- **You can use opposition research to pinpoint your target’s vulnerabilities.** Corporate campaigns often rise and fall on the ability of the researchers to find instances of lawbreaking, regulatory noncompliance, misbehavior, and character flaws, and on the campaigners’ talent to amplify and publicize these flaws. By searching the Internet, doing some shoe leather detective work, and even going through the target’s trash (“dumpster diving”), you will be able to craft a bill of indictment against all but the saintliest of targets. (The laws on going through garbage are complex. Generally, if the trash is on private property, the trash is private property. Going after it can be deemed trespass, and taking it can be deemed theft. But, generally, if the trash is at curbside or in another public place, it is no longer private property and its former owner is presumed to have waived any right to privacy or possession.) If, after your best efforts, you discover that your target has never done anything wrong, that is good to know, because maybe you need to pick a different target.

- **You can determine available sources of money** your opponent has to finance your group’s demands. You also can plan your answer for the inevitable response: “We just don’t have the money for that.” If you have done your homework, you can respond: “You have $375,000 in unspent discretionary funds” or “Your company made $16 billion in profits over the past three years.”

- **You can establish the legal basis and precedents for what your group wants.** You also can determine whether your target is fully complying with the law. This kind of research must be done carefully and should be double- and triple-checked. In the labor movement, we usually have lawyers review the findings—mistakes can ruin the campaign and damage the organization.

- **You can prepare comparisons** between the conditions members of your group must endure in their lives and the way your opponents live. One construction contractor blurted out, “I’ve got a [bleeping] two million dollar house—what have YOU got?” when he was telling off an organizer. That was a great question that was answered in a handbill showing a photo of the contractor’s $2 million house juxtaposed with three-decker substandard housing he owned.

- **You can unearth the sources of financing and ownership** behind your opposition and use these findings to go after a secondary target. The budgets of public agencies are public record. Stock-selling public corporations have to file complete financial detail with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Small companies usually provide Dun & Bradstreet
with financial information. Though Dun & Bradstreet reports are expensive, they often are the only way to get useful financial information on smaller, private companies.

- **You can find people who share an interest in your group’s issue.** Using today’s Internet technology, you can find public records of other groups with an interest in your target or issue through a quick, free, and easy run on a search engine such as Google or Yahoo.

- **You can uncover hidden connections.** (Example: All patronage jobs must be cleared by Boss Cigar, ward leader of the Second District, and politicians are very reluctant to cross him.) Some of the premium search engines (e.g., Westlaw or Lexis-Nexis) allow you to search “executive affiliations.” This allows you to identify other businesses or interests your target may have. If you determine, for example, that your target is an officer in many other businesses including some that are quite different than the business that interests you the most, you might be looking at potential secondary targets. Conversely, if your target has a variety of business interests, it could be a source of strength since these other businesses represent likely sources of income.

- **You can investigate scare tactics used by your opponent.** In the global economy, capital is mobile. Companies use job blackmail as a standard tactic to win concessions from communities and workers. The threat is far from subtle: “Give us what we want or we’re outta here.” One way or the other, you will need to come up with a counter to this threat, either by disproving it or showing reasons why the community needs to stand up to this threat.

Organizations struggle with two important issues: *How much research is enough? Who should do the research, and how should it be done?*

First, **how much research should the organization do?** The answer is “enough.” Enough to understand the lay of the land. Enough to act. Enough to inspire confidence within the membership ranks. Enough to reasonably predict the target’s behavior. Enough to avoid errors and waste. Every organizer can spin a yarn about going into a fight blind, but winning anyway. Every organizer also can tell a number of sad tales of defeats that resulted from poor intelligence. Yes, you can win with brawn and luck. However, you can win more consistently, convincingly, and economically by adding good research to the mix.

The opposite of too little research is, of course, too much. Shel Trapp of National People’s Action characterizes this error as becoming “slaves to research.” The danger signs include delaying action until “we can gather just a little more research,” letting the researchers call the shots and set the tempo for organizing, and thinking that “once this stuff gets in the media, they’ll have to give in.” It’s time for people in your group to reassess
how research is done when you discover that it’s producing more reports and exposés and giving more “facts” to the media than doing actions. Leadership is knowing when enough research is enough. Good leaders can balance the need to look before leaping in blind against the danger of becoming paralyzed from fear of the unknown.

WHO SHOULD DO THE RESEARCH, AND HOW SHOULD IT BE DONE?

The usual answer is staff, and often that means that organizers try to do strategic research on top of their other duties. I happen to think organizers do the best organizing research, but not necessarily on top of the rest of their tasks. If the organization can afford it, hiring a full-time strategic researcher is a good investment, though it is an investment not every organization can make. I spent many years working with grassroots environmental groups that were run entirely by volunteers. I encouraged these groups to create “fact-finding committees” (I used “fact-finding” rather than “research” to avoid the nerdy connotation “research” evokes) so that the strategic research got done through the work of many hands and the fruits of that research were shared, because no one person controlled it.

There is a danger to letting one person control the research. The worst case was a group where the research person held onto a leadership position by opening and closing the spigot on the flow of information as a control mechanism. She collected mountains of research, so much so that she actually had to build an additional room in her house. Other leaders had to make an appointment to look at records, could only do so under her watchful eye, and weren’t allowed to take any records outside of her special research room or even to make copies. She was paranoid in the extreme that the opposition might find out about this amazing stash of documents. As you might imagine, this group was an organizational basket case. Other leaders asked me for advice. After failing to find a way to reason with this “data fanatic,” I suggested the group get on with its organizing as if she and her treasure trove didn’t exist. Once weaned from dependence, the group moved on to success.

There are varying degrees of “data fanaticism.” This example is an extreme case, of course. Data fanatics also can be unbearable showoffs, chewing up endless amounts of meeting time with monologues on every little piece of information they’ve gathered. I have met data fanatics who traveled around with files and records in suitcases. You knew you were in trouble when they would corner you and ask, “Do you have a couple of minutes for me to show you something?” If you find yourself in that situation, the answer is “NO!” Then run.
Organizing research should be part of the organizing process. This means that organizers, whether paid or volunteer, should look for ways to make the job of doing research an opportunity to build organizational strength.

Ask members to participate in the process. If the organization is volunteer run or lacks staff, this is a necessity. But even when the organization has research staff, you still should look for ways to bring the members into the process. When I served as research director for the union organizing drive at the Avondale Shipyard in New Orleans, I regularly sat with rank-and-file members to evaluate the research. Even hardworking, dog-tired workers liked it when I asked them questions or sought their opinions. We canvassed retirees for their knowledge and experience. Though this approach took a little longer than it would have as a solely staff function, we got better information and the members got to own it.

When an organizer has to do her or his own research, the odds of error increase. Organizers are notoriously prone to burn out as it is. The stress of a research snafu can end a promising organizer’s career. A good organizer should be able to come up with a tailored response that gets used so often among volunteer groups. Tailor your request for member participation with some members involved in doing the research. Maybe the approach is the “fact-finding committee’s” sensitivity to people’s situation. If your members are dog-tired from hard work (like the workers at Avondale), go easy at the start and then increase the level of involvement based on the circumstances. While you should be sensitive, do not be condescending. Over the thirty years I have done this work, I have been regularly surprised by members who rise to the challenge.

I once did a workshop for welfare mothers on how to analyze the budgets of government agencies. Prior to the workshop, I sent out a notice asking each of them to come to the workshop with a pocket calculator. The organizers told me I was being unreasonable—it was wrong to ask the welfare moms to bring a calculator and doubly wrong to assume they would know how to use one. Going into the workshop, I had my doubts. But at the appointed time, the members came to the workshop equipped with their calculators and did just fine using them, thank you very much. I taught classes at the George Meany Center on using computers for organizing research. Some of the union organizers had never used a computer—a few had never even seen the keyboard before. I teamed up these rank “newbies” with more experienced users who could mentor them. By the end of the typical two-day class, each of the newbies could function at least at a minimal level and some showed remarkable progress. Count no one out of the process.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

As seductive as it is to lean on computer research, remember that it is but one source of organizing research. Human intelligence is essential. I
rarely feel I really understand a research subject until I actually have looked at it with my own eyes. Most organizing decisions are formed based on people and power. We look at our own capabilities by assessing our resources and our membership strength. We also size up our opposition by trying to understand who makes the decisions we want and the source of their power.

I offer my present and future research colleagues some observations on research methodology.

• **Make a plan.** Organizing research is not “pure” or academic research. What do you want to know? Why do you need to know it? Where will you find it? Do not lose sight of the issue for which the research is conducted. Your research is useless if it is (1) too complicated to be distilled into a simple fact sheet or given to leaders in briefing, (2) too late to be used in the organizing campaign, (3) unfocused or off the point, or (4) wrong.

• **You can’t fight city hall.** However, you can fight the mayor. Sometimes in our rhetorical excess, we talk about fighting the “system,” overthrowing injustice, and battling evil corporations. These are great applause lines, but impractical strategic goals. Unless somebody can give me the “system’s” home address and phone number, how can we fight it? I have no interest in signing on to a campaign against a Fortune 500 company until I can break down who it is in that company who holds the levers of power. Often, the most useful organizing research is information about people.

• **When panning for gold, don’t discard the diamonds.** Research can be a long and tedious process. You can pile up lots of information while finding very few nuggets of information that you can put to immediate use. When I research a corporation, I will usually accumulate a pile of paper the thickness of a phone book after only a few hours’ work. I don’t toss the pile after extracting the nuggets because you never know whether today’s irrelevant factoid will become the center point in tomorrow’s handbill.

• **So what?** This is the companion rule to the prior one about not tossing the diamonds. Ask yourself, “So what?” often as a way to evaluate the value of a piece of information. Usually information only becomes useful when compared to something else. For example, if you find that a certain company discharges a million tons of trichlorobadstuff from its smokestack, you may become very alarmed, unless you learn that the average company in that industry discharges 10 million tons. Or you may think a certain supermarket might be vulnerable to consumer pressure because its profit margin is only 1 percent, unless you compare that company to other supermarkets where a half-percent profit margin is considered normal and healthy.

• **Spinning makes the world go round.** I teach new researchers that there are three essential parts to doing organizing research: first you collect information, then you analyze it, but finally you must package it for use.
Fail at any one of these tasks, and your work may be in vain. When I package my research, I usually include recommendations for ways the research can be used.

- **Follow the money.** Next to understanding who makes the decisions, good research tells you where your target’s money comes from and where it goes.

- **Who is connected to whom?** Refer back to the Wheel of Power. The keys to victory often lie in your understanding of your target’s web of relationships.

- **“Only believe what you see with your own two eyes—and have your eyes examined regularly.”** In the journalism business, this is called “confirmation.” In organizing research, much of what you can collect may be rumor, hearsay, and other unsubstantiated information, because of limitations of time and resources. While I am not making any apologies for this grim fact of life, you as the researcher must know the difference between proof and semi-intelligent opinion. And, if you want to be responsible, you ought to make sure that everyone else in the group knows what you have (and what you don’t). Wherever possible, substantiate, and the best way to do that is get it in writing.

- **Use the computer and the phone, but understand their limitations.** These are vital tools to help you locate actual records you can get or things you can see. The Internet vastly expands the amount of public information available on every imaginable topic. The Internet also has increased the amount of misinformation out there, as well. Even when you use high-priced data services, the information could be wrong. For example, both Westlaw and Lexis-Nexis buy data on corporate registrations from state regulators. Many states use prisoners to enter information into those state databases. Given their circumstances, some of those convicts are not very motivated to be 100 percent accurate. Mistakes happen and get into the system, get sold to Westlaw, and end up on an organizer’s handbill. Oops. When I can’t get a copy of an important record from its original source, I get at least two confirmations of the information before I use it.

- **Develop sources and use them well.** Honor confidentiality promises. Many good resources, such as reporters, academics, and others who do research for a living, respond well to compliments. As you will discover when you do research, the researcher seldom gets many strokes. Keep a file of good research contacts. Ask them about their research resources and keep note of their answers. Lower-level employees have always been my best inside sources. I look for people who have been passed over for promotion, or who hate their boss. When I worked for the Citizens Coal Council, our best sources were mine inspectors who were kept from doing their jobs by politics that allowed coal companies to break the law with a
wink and a nod. These mine inspectors hated being hamstrung, so they fed us information we could use to do their jobs for them. Whether a source is motivated by principal or by some baser motive, you must protect your source at all costs. Burn a source and you will never get—and do not deserve to get—another.

- **If you can't find an insider, make one.** In the labor movement, particularly in building trades, we create our own inside sources by “salting” a company. We send union members to get hired by a targeted contractor. If the contractor hires them, we have our insider. If the contractor refuses to hire them because they are a union member, we have the basis for a successful “unfair labor practice” charge against that employer.

- **Know the rules for access to information.** Generally, organizing researchers assume the public has a right to information. And generally this is true and well-supported by law and established procedure. But understand that in most bureaucracies, the only power the lower level bureaucrat has is the “power to obstruct.” Added to that is a general suspicion of anyone out of the ordinary asking out-of-the-ordinary questions. In recent years, fear of litigation is a barrier to disclosure. When I try to get information on a contractor's past performance and check with prior customers, they rarely will disclose what happened for fear of being sued by the contractor. I find that I have to use state open-records laws to pry this information from public agencies (e.g., school departments) often in the form of internal memos, e-mails and letters. This often pisses off the agency, so it is a step taken only after weighing the potential political fallout.

- **Use the best available technology, but do not overlook or minimize low-tech sources of information.** I have seen researchers puzzle over the problem of how to get a target’s home address for hours, when they could have found it in seconds just by looking in the phone book. Read the newspaper and keep a clippings file. You can combine organizing methods and the classic research method of the survey—to get to talk with people about an issue and gather valuable information. Talking with people can get you new members as well as useful intelligence.

- **Finally, let people in on the fun.** I once helped prepare a team of new leaders to go over to their county building to investigate property ownership records. This was the first time any of them had even set foot inside that building. Several hours later they returned, not just with very useful information that was later used to organize, but with a new sense of confidence. “For the first time,” said one of the leaders, “I felt like those people [in the county building] worked for me!”
**REAL CLOUT: RULES AND TOOLS FOR WINNING PUBLIC POLICY CAMPAIGNS**

*Judith C. Meredith and Catherine Dunham*

Selected and edited passages from *Real Clout* and *The Real Clout Workbook* by Judith C. Meredith and Catherine Dunham. *Real Clout* is available free on the web www.accessprojects.org.

We define a *public policy campaign* as a series of actions and activities designed to persuade public policy-makers to make something happen or do something different. Pass a new law or amend an old one. Write a new regulation or enforce a current one. Appropriate some new money or finally make a budget allocation. Or sometimes, just listen.

Here are some *Real Clout Tools and Rules* to help you develop a winning public policy campaign and help you develop a convincing campaign message, organize your own campaigns resources, and mobilize a district-based campaign.

**THE HERO OPPORTUNITY**

**Hero Opportunity**

Hero Opportunity (n) a compelling problem or crisis that provides policy-makers with public occasions to propose and champion a solution that brings a measurable difference in the lives of a critical mass of constituents, as in “desperate for hero opportunities.”

One of the basic operating assumptions of *Real Clout* is that of the “Hero Opportunity.” Elected and appointed public officials actually are pretty ordinary people. Like most of us, they are smart in some ways, and dumb in others. They happen to hold down highly visible public jobs that do not pay as much as the private sector and demand long hours of endless meetings with various public constituencies, who, for the most part, view them as politicians, rather than policy-makers. And as we all know, most ordinary
citizens have a pretty dim view of politicians, thanks in large measure to
a long list of unsavory local, state, and national scandals that have exposed
some as personally greedy and morally corrupt.

As human beings, most elected or appointed policy-makers love their
jobs and often are ambitious to move up. They love the excitement of being
*in the middle of the political action* in a capital city. They love being able to re-
ally *make a difference in the lives* of their neighbors and friends by exercising
their power and influence. They love the satisfaction of *being and feeling im-
portant*, of knowing they have been key players in important policy changes
that improved the lives of thousands of people—most of whom never give
the state capital, county seat, or city hall a second thought.

That is why as politicians they are especially responsive to a critical mass
of constituents offering them a “hero opportunity” and always are eager
to champion a public policy initiative that will win them the respect and
gratitude of an important constituency in their district.

And, that is why smart savvy political operatives brainstorm ways to cre-
ate hero opportunities for them!

**THE THREE RULES OF INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY**

The First Rule of Influencing Public Policy

Elected decision-makers make different decisions when watched by
the affected constituents.

In the face of an emerging crisis, public policy-makers do not have the
time or the resources to engage in a scientific decision-making process.
There is no positing and testing hypotheses for a governor trying to fig-
ure out if the state can intervene to stop the purchase of three commu-
nity hospitals by an out-of-state, for-profit corporation.

“Just do it!” say the outraged community activists.

“Can’t do it!” say the governor’s lawyers, citing the sections of the law
limiting the state’s ability to interfere in private business transactions.

“Can too!” say the advocate’s lawyers, pointing to some existing regu-
lations authorizing the governor to set standards for community benefits.

Appointed and elected public officials have to make many of their pol-
icy decisions in a vacuum of information or opinion from anybody. There
are no urgent pleadings of lobbyists, no probing questions from the
media, no idle commentary from family and friends, and no concerned in-
terest from affected constituents. Any facts or opinions from any of the
above often are gratefully received: “At last, I know what somebody who
knows something thinks about this issue!” It is not uncommon for any legislator, approaching the chamber in response to a roll call alert, to ask their colleagues or any friendly lobbyists in sight, “What’s this vote about? Do you know how it affects my district?” Nor is it uncommon for an assistant commissioner in the middle of reviewing the seventeenth draft of the Medicaid regs to plead with her staff to get some direct feedback from somebody on the “front lines,” a real provider or consumer who actually will have to deal with this stuff on a day-to-day basis.

The legislator and the commissioner both want their decision informed by constituents and citizens directly affected by the issue at hand.

The Second Rule for Influencing Public Policy

Get the right information to the right person at the right time.

In other words, get accurate, compelling, sympathetic, completely factual information about your hero opportunity to the appropriate policy-maker before he or she makes a decision about your policy initiative. Completely factual information includes how the policy problem affects constituents, how the proposed policy solution will help, how much it will cost the taxpayers, who else supports it and why, and who is against it and why. By the time the campaign is in full swing, you will find yourself muttering that you already know more than the policy-makers themselves, and that’s a good thing.

How do advocates find the “right time” in the executive branch?

Savvy activists closely monitor the public pronouncements and policy decisions of the public officials who run the departments and agencies that affect their programs. They seek to build a professional trusting relationship with the department staff and engage in mutual information sharing about developing public policy initiatives and pending crises. They invite key policy-makers to speak at their annual meetings to announce those initiatives and alert their members about potential critical issues. Never combative, always the loyal opposition, these advocates always stand ready to provide input on any pending public policy decision, and to step in after a public crisis or scandal, offering the policy-makers help and support in devising an appropriate response.

How do advocates find the “right time” in the legislative branch?

Smart advocates closely monitor the public pronouncements made by legislative leaders and the daily decisions made by the whole legislative
body, trying to spot an opening window for their policy solution. They develop trusting professional relationships with leadership and committee policy staff and engage in mutual information sharing about upcoming legislative debates on their issues. They monitor policy debates about related issues in order to identify and evaluate potential heroes and possible opponents.

As an advocate’s bill or budget moves from the clerk’s office to joint committee, to ways and means, to the floor, to the other branch, and to the conference committee, the message may change, and the recipients of the message may be different individuals. But the delivery schedule is consistent. Committee members get briefed before the bill is heard, rank-and-file members get briefed before the floor vote, and leadership gets briefed before the conference committee deliberations.

**The Third Rule of Influencing Public Policy**

Public policy-makers weigh opinion as equal to fact.

Attention all readers rolling your eyes about public officials making sloppy decisions—consider these two facts.

Fact #1. Policy-makers do not have enough time, staff, or technical expertise to make a fully informed decision about every policy issue before them. When forced to vote on an issue about which they have limited information, they have to make judgments based largely on personal values and experience. On some issues—say, abortion or capital punishment—the facts may not weigh very much at all, which is fine with some folks and disgusting to others. It depends, of course, on their opinion on the issue.

Fact #2. Ordinary folks like you and me make private policy decisions the same way. When we make family policy about body piercing for teenagers. When we make office policy and compose a mission statement. When we make church policy and decide to offer the pastor’s job to a lesbian. On some private policies like the ones above, the facts weigh very little, which is fine for those who agree, but disgusting to those who do not.

Actually, this decision-making dynamic is a critical component of our democracy, no matter how goofy it seems to trained scientists and lawyers. Elected policy-makers are forced to make their decisions based not only on the objective facts, but also on our subjective opinions. And, of course, that is great for us, but may be disgusting for any opponents.
MOUNTING A PUBLIC POLICY CAMPAIGN

Step 1: Developing a Campaign Message

The message development tool below can help you persuade an important audience to do something to advance your campaign.

Use it to persuade allies to join your coalition.
Use it to convince private donors to contribute to your campaign.
Use it to recruit affected constituents into your district-based grassroots network.
Use it in a district meeting with an elected policy-maker.
Use it in an elevator conversation at the state capital with a trapped public policy-maker.
Use it to ask a legislator to be a key sponsor for your bill.
Use it to ask a public manager to begin a process to amend regulations.
Use it to ask the governor to issue an executive order.
Use it to ask the legislative leadership to schedule your bill for debate.
Use it to ask the commissioner to stand with you at a press conference.

Fill in the Blanks Message Tool

_________________________ is in crisis because ____________________________.

You should care because ____________________________________________.

We know that __________________________ will begin to fix it.

You can help by ________________________________________________.

You can use the message tool to develop various message vehicles including fact sheets, research reports, talking points for press statements, and public hearings—and even campaign slogans and bumper stickers. Every message vehicle (even slogans and bumper stickers) should tell the audience the following:

What exactly is the public policy problem that has to be fixed?
What exactly is your solution?
Why exactly should the audience (public policy-maker, constituent, allied organization) care about it?
What exactly can they do to help, and who do they contact to get involved or to answer any questions?
**Message Vehicles**

**A One-Page Fact Sheet.** Yes, you can have it double sided. The first part should engage the reader by describing a compelling problem and the sympathetic affected constituency. The second part should establish the credibility of the campaign by describing the coalition and naming the leadership. The third part should outline the campaign’s specific goal (e.g., persuade a public manager to change a current practice, or persuade a legislative body to pass legislation). The fourth part should describe the campaign’s general work plan and current activities. The fifth part should name the campaign contact persons and give their phone, fax numbers, and office and e-mail addresses. A good fact sheet should be updated regularly as the campaign progresses. Use the fact sheet to develop other message vehicles, including press releases, membership mailings, newsletter updates, direct mail fundraising, and fax and e-mail alerts.

**An Outline of a Ten-Page Research Report.** You will establish your campaign’s credibility if you can produce an official-looking research report written (or at least reviewed and endorsed) by respected outside experts and opinion makers. This is especially true if the report includes footnotes and charts that document the problem as significant and support your solution as effective. A research report can be used as a centerpiece for a statewide or local press event; as briefing material to administration officials and key legislators; and/or as the main training document for allied organizations, coalition campaign staff, and local grassroots leaders.

**Talking Points for a Five-Minute or Thirty-Second Verbal Rap.** Everyone working on your campaign will need talking points to help them handle short telephone or in-person conversations about the campaign. The script will change as the campaign progresses, according to the audience and the requested action step. For instance, a legislator will be asked to take a series of actions as the bill or budget item moves through the legislative process. First the legislator might be asked to sponsor the legislation, then asked to write a support letter to the joint committee, and then asked to participate in floor debate. Or, a potential ally might be asked first to endorse the campaign, then asked to participate in a coalition decision-making process, then asked to mobilize a membership letter-writing campaign.

**Slogans, Bumper Stickers, Buttons, and Sound Bites.** We all figure out a shorthand way to describe even the most complicated complex campaign, if only for our own meeting agendas and “things to do” lists. Some coalitions have a resident wit capable of transforming “managed care reform campaign” or “community benefits campaign” into slogans or twenty-second sound bites for the morning paper or the evening news. Other campaigns find the resources to hire, or get free advice from pollsters or public relations consultants. The general rule for bumper stickers and buttons is
that they deliver a message that prompts the reader’s support or action, and discloses a campaign contact. (Even if it’s in teeny-weeny print around the edge.) The general rule for sound bites is to have at least two designated spokespersons (one affected constituent and one coalition member) who can deliver a quote that describes the current situation and reinforces the campaigns goals.

Step 2: Building and Sustaining Operational Coalitions

The next step is to start the campaign rolling by figuring out how to build and maintain an operational coalition. Get ready to deal with the politics of coalition building! Some of us who are more controlling and impatient than we should be used to think that coalition politics made the state capital seem like a church, until we learned a little more about church politics.

Coalition Politics

We can learn some lessons from the “operational coalitions” built by health access advocates and tobacco control advocates in Massachusetts, Arizona, California, and Oregon during their successful campaigns to fund health care access with tobacco tax revenues. By reaching out to “untraditional allies” in the business community and among the powerful trade associations, the health access/tobacco control advocates were able to build a powerful, well-funded campaign that was governed by a steering committee drawn from coalition members.

Lesson number 1. Build a power-sharing coalition. Operational coalitions are those where each participating organization has made an official board-approved decision to share power, credit, and blame with other members of the coalition.

Lesson number 2. Recruit untraditional allies. Untraditional allies have a couple of distinguishing characteristics. First, they usually have totally different perspectives on the same issue, example, consumers and providers. Second, there is often a long history of conflict and even confrontation between the partners. Third, there is often a striking difference in organizational capacity, resources, and decision-making cultures, which goes beyond the usual turf and competition issues among traditional coalition partners.

Lesson number 3. Recognize and respect cultural differences. The first symptom of distress among untraditional allies is mutual cultural shock over process issues that masks important
unresolved questions about the balance of power. A typical balance of power question is; “Which organizations carry the most weight: the partners who have a lot of resources (usually the providers), or the partners who have the ability to deliver and mobilize a sympathetic constituency (usually the consumer advocacy organizations)?” The struggle over power finally is resolved when the consumer organizations realize how much the campaign depends on the providers’ resources and the providers realize how much the campaign needs the consumers’ attractive constituency.

**Words to the Wise**

1. Set up a “steering committee” composed of the major partners who have a high level of commitment to the campaign. Each organization should be able to contribute something of unique value to the campaign in at least one of three categories:
   A. Cash/fundraising capacity
   B. Grassroots capacity to deliver sympathetic consumers/beneficiaries able to inform and motivate public policy-makers
   C. Political capital—policy expertise and demonstrated political credibility at the state house

2. Set up a democratic governance structure that allows for a full and factual discussion of issues, the honest resolution of conflict, and a satisfactory planning and evaluation process. That means:
   A. Establishing a clear understanding of the decision-making process (Majority rules? Weighted votes? Consensus? Veto power?).
   B. Adequately briefing coalition members in writing or e-mail before regularly scheduled meetings and emergency meetings.
   C. Implementing clear communications between meetings, which includes future action plans.

**CAMPAIGN OPERATIONS**

We defined a public policy campaign as nothing more than a series of connected events and activities that together, over a period of time, result in a new or improved public policy. Campaign operations is nothing more than planning, coordinating, and connecting the events and activities. The best advice from successful public policy advocates is to organize your resources by task. Our chart below lists the standard
campaign jobs by task that each should have an assigned team leader. Most low-budget campaigns do just fine by utilizing two or three talented people who wear multiple hats. Some medium-budget campaigns find it useful to insert an experienced consultant into a campaign to help with press, message development, or political analysis. (More on hiring consultants later.)

**Team Leaders’ Job Description and Qualifications**

**Job: Coalition Operations**
- **Job description:** Managing coalition decision making and budget, managing fundraising and internal coalition communications. Reports to steering committee.
- **Qualifications:** Experienced project and people manager, good consensus-building skills.

**Job: Director of Policy and Research**
- **Job description:** Managing ongoing policy research and message development.
- **Qualifications:** Policy wonk who can write clear prose, possibly a short-term consultant.

**Job: Grassroots Mobilizing Director**
- **Job description:** Managing membership outreach, education, and mobilization.
- **Qualifications:** Inspirational cheerleader who can manage mass communication tools.

**Job: Media Communications**
- **Job description:** Managing earned media, paid ads, and other public awareness activities.
- **Qualifications:** Experienced spinmeister in public policy arena, possibly a short-term consultant.

**Job: State Capital Operations**
- **Job description:** Coordinating the professional and grassroots lobbying activities directed at public policy-makers in the executive or legislative branch.
- **Qualifications:** Respected, experienced public policy advocate, possibly a short-term consultant.

**A Public Policy Campaign Timeline**

If the reader thought our definition of a public policy campaign as nothing more than “a series of connected events and activities that together, over a period of time, result in a new or improved public policy” was a bit understated and simplistic, wait till you see our campaign timeline chart. We will defend its simplicity, however, because most advocates have put together campaigns before—money-raising campaigns, public
awareness campaigns, outreach and education campaigns, and membership campaigns. For each of those campaigns, somebody sat down to write the list of precampaign planning activities, followed by the list of implementation activities, followed by the celebration and evaluation activities.

**Model Timeline**

### Planning and Other Precampaign Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task/Activity</th>
<th>Team Leader(s)</th>
<th>Product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Message Development</td>
<td>Policy Research, Media Relations</td>
<td>A verbal rap, one-page fact sheet, ten-page background for public policy arena, media, potential coalition members, and potential state house champions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition Building/ Solicitation of Partners</td>
<td>Coalition Operations</td>
<td>Choosing of Steering Committee, who in turn devise and approve a coalition governance agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition Fundraising</td>
<td>Coalition Operations</td>
<td>Budget developed; money-raising plan in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Member-ship Education and Mobilization</td>
<td>Grassroots Mobilization, Policy Research</td>
<td>Develop training materials; identify grassroots leaders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Implementation or Herding Cats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task/Activity</th>
<th>Team Leader(s)</th>
<th>Product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focused Message Development</td>
<td>Policy Research, Steering Committee, State House Operations, Media Relations</td>
<td>Specialized verbal raps, fact sheets, customized and backgrounded for each audience; regional media events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task/Activity</td>
<td>Team Leader(s)</td>
<td>Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and Political Analysis</td>
<td>Steering Committee, Policy Research, State House</td>
<td>Refined solution options, thoroughly analyzed and prioritized; bottom lines established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Operations, State House Champions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition Communications and</td>
<td>Coalition Operations, Steering Committee</td>
<td>Coalition trust building through ongoing communications, regular briefings, open decision-making procedures, and a fair process for resolving differences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance, Solicitation of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Partners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget and Fundraising</td>
<td>Steering Committee, Coalition Operations</td>
<td>Prompt reporting of expenditures and ongoing solicitation of funds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Membership</td>
<td>Grassroots Mobilization, Policy Research, Steering</td>
<td>Develop training materials and identify grassroots leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Mobilization</td>
<td>Committee, Media Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Model Workplan**

Here is a model workplan that comes with its own self-assessment tool that was developed for distribution after the 1996 Children’s Health Care/Tobacco Tax conference.

A successful health access/tobacco tax campaign:

- Has identified a compelling, winnable legislative or referendum fight that pays for expanded access to health care through an increase in state taxes on tobacco products.
- Has identified and recruited an organizeable, mobilizable base of affected constituents and powerful allied organizations.
- Is governed by a representative coalition of organizations and community leaders who are smart informed, strategic thinkers and doers.
- Is managed day-to-day by competent hardworking staff with sufficient resources.

**Phase I.** The first phase of a successful health access campaign typically involves the following.

For legislative campaigns:

Basic legal research to determine the correct legal process, procedures, and deadlines for making amendments to state law. Additional legal and
regulatory research may be necessary to determine and resolve questions relating to new federal law related to health insurance and Medicaid eligibility, as well as any ERISA preemption issues, new (and pending) federal tobacco taxes, and tobacco control policies.

For referenda or initiative campaigns:

Basic legal research to determine the correct legal processes, procedures, and deadlines for state or local ballot referenda initiatives, including making perfecting amendments, if necessary. Additional legal and regulatory research may be necessary to determine and resolve questions relating to new federal law related to health insurance and Medicaid eligibility. ERISA preemption issues, as well as any new or pending federal laws regarding tobacco taxes and tobacco control policies, also are researched.

For all campaigns:

Basic research and data gathering to identify all the potential recipients and providers of health care, as well as all the potential consumers and distributors of tobacco products who might be affected by a new state program increasing access to health care funded by an increased tax on tobacco products.

Basic political analysis to identify all the potential partners and allies, their internal resources, their current public image and political clout, including untraditional allies for coalition building purposes. Partners are those organizations willing and able to commit significant organizational resources—including, but not limited to, turnout of a large number of members for district-based grassroots and volunteer activities.

Basic political analysis to identify all the potential opponents and their internal resources. This includes assessing their current public image and political clout, including their involvement with other federal or state antitobacco tax or health access expansion activities.

Bottom-line poll to determine the public’s attitude around health access issues, increased taxes on tobacco and other tobacco control efforts, potential opponents, and possible allies.

The development and testing of the basic messages for the campaign and the development of preliminary materials for use in coalition building.

The development of internal campaign organizations of uninsured families who are committed to working on the campaign.
Phase II. The second phase typically would include the following:

The formation of a diverse, representative coalition of key health and tobacco control advocacy organizations, providers, insurers, and other “untraditional” allies (such as the business community), who agree to participate as partners to govern the campaign. Each partner should be committed to donating dollars and in-kind staff, and turning out large numbers of volunteers for campaign activities.

The establishment of an official campaign committee with campaign bank accounts and fundraising and expenditure procedures that are in compliance with the law, and a campaign staff to carry out day-to-day activities.

The refinement of a final campaign message using additional polling and/or focus groups and/or consultation.

The development of a public education campaign to manage the delivery of the messages through free and paid media.

The development of targeted opposition research, including the identification of local targets and a plan of activities for Phase III.

The establishment of a grassroots volunteer field to distribute campaign materials through a district-base grassroots organizational structure to targeted workers from each coalition member’s organizational base, other potential allies, the media, and the appropriate elected officials.

Phase III. Phase III of a successful campaign typically marks the beginning of the implementation of a initiative or legislative campaign.

Legislative campaigns:

1. The campaign has an informed understanding of the political history and current political dynamics of the state legislature, and a well-thought-out strategy for assembling a majority and winning the support of the governor including:
   - an understanding of the legislative rules controlling the traditional committee process, hearing schedule, timetables, and voting and amendment procedures.
   - an understanding of the political dynamics within each legislator’s district and within the legislative body, including the election year proximity factor.
   - an understanding of which elected official(s) would be the most effective sponsor(s) of health access legislation.
   - a plan and a capacity to carry out a district-based lobbying campaign.
2. A paid and free targeted media plan to support the lobbying campaign—open hearings in the neighborhoods, direct actions against targeted opponents, workplace leaflets and canvassing, production of canned op-eds and letters to the editor, radio talk shows, paid print, and radio and TV ads.

3. A public campaign to identify and polarize appropriate opposition targets, including a series of “reports” and direct actions.

Initiative and Referenda Campaigns:

1. The campaign has access to local legal experts who have developed legally correct ballot language and petitions, and are on top of deadlines as well as all legal requirements around signature gathering (such as notarization requirements and perfecting amendment procedures).

2. The campaign has a clear strategy for gathering signatures that all the partners have bought into.

3. The campaign has an internal capacity and clear and effective accountability systems among partners to collect signatures, using volunteers and paid signature gatherers if necessary.

4. The campaign has a plan and the internal capacity to manage the message through free and paid media. This includes neighborhood or large-event leaflets, rallies, detailed press backgrounders on targeted opponents, and paid ads.

5. The campaign should have a good “Get Out The Vote” (GOTV) strategy, including:
   - a collaborative and productive relationship with the allied organizations’ statewide apparatus.
   - enough detailed polling data to permit targeting potential voters by neighborhood or other relevant geographical area.
   - a plan and an internal capacity to carry out the traditional GOTV activities during the last thirty days—phone banking, literature drops, canvassing, election day poll coverage, and so on.

ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZING GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS INTO ACTION

A winning plan depends on a campaign’s ability to organize and mobilize a district-based grassroots network of affected constituents into a coordinated series of activities designed to persuade key policy-makers to fix their community problem. The suggested recruitment, training, and mobilization techniques that follow are drawn from the experiences of a number
of veteran public policy entrepreneurs. Their experiences have taught them that mobilizing self-interested constituents into public policy campaigns is not only the best way to inform and motivate public policy-makers; it also provides a platform for leadership development and the individual empowerment of participants.

Identifying and Recruiting Local Activists into Action

Start with Your Base. Engage and recruit the membership of coalition partners. Since some organizations do not demand much from their members except dues, be prepared to give them some help in developing a good internal membership education and outreach effort. Encourage all your coalition partners to customize the campaign message for their own organization and figure out how to get a “Call to Action” message out through regularly scheduled meetings and newsletters, or even a special membership alert mailing. The Call to Action should help members see their own, or their organization’s, direct self-interest in the campaign. It should persuade them that their personal participation in district meetings with their own local public policy-makers is necessary and critical, and it should reassure them that they will be part of a powerful statewide coalition effort that means to win concrete improvement in the lives of the participants.

Expand Your Base. Ask local activists to develop a list of community organizations and institutions that might support the campaign and produce volunteers for meetings with local public policy-makers. For instance, tobacco control activists usually can get endorsements and volunteers through the local Heart and Lung Associations, as well as the American Cancer Society and municipal boards of health. Advocates for the underserved and uninsured can get support from local churches, social service agencies, and neighborhood health centers; and they can find affected constituents by flyering neighborhood meetings and posting notices in laundromats. Use the local media, including church bulletins and weekly shoppers, to invite the public to community meetings. Check out the local radio station and cable TV shows for opportunities to reach out to affected constituents and volunteers.

Organizing Activists into State or Local District-Based Networks

Start by identifying local coordinators. Each organization’s board and staff should be asked to identify key members throughout the state who can be recruited into taking a local coordinating role. Some campaigns bring the local coordinators into one statewide training and briefing meeting in order to build solidarity and a sense of power. Other campaigns have
improved attendance by holding regional training meetings. In both cases, the agenda always includes:

- A briefing on the policy issue—the problem and the proposed solution.
- A briefing on the public policy-making process—how this particular administration and/or the legislature make policy, and how by working together we can influence the process by offering our solution to solve their policy problem.
- A briefing package on the key public policy-makers themselves. The leadership in the administration and/or the legislature with addresses, phone numbers, pictures, and a little background on the issue, if possible.

Ask the local coordinators to go back home and immediately begin to organize a local training session that includes a variation of the same three items:

- A briefing on the policy issue—the problem and the proposed solution.
- A briefing on the public policy-making process—how this particular administration and/or the legislature make policy, and how by working together with people from all over the state we can influence the process by offering our solution to solve their policy problem.
- A briefing package on the key public policy-makers themselves—the leadership in the administration and/or the legislature, with addresses, phone numbers, pictures, and a little background on the issue, if possible; a detailed briefing on local policy-makers that includes input from community activists who have worked with them in the past.

Mobilizing Activists into Action

The campaign’s job is to put Rule #2 into action, namely, \textit{getting the right information to the right person at the right time} through a series of coordinated campaign activities.

\textbf{Local Activities}

District Meetings with local elected and appointed officials have two main goals: briefing local public officials about the community’s public policy problem, and asking the same public officials to support the community’s proposed policy solution. District meetings can take many forms, but all should include an opportunity for affected constituents to tell their own story, and a role for each of the coalition partners. Smart local coordinators hold a premeeting and prepare a rough “script” that includes introductions,
a presentation of the problem by affected constituents, a presentation of the proposed solution by other coalition members, and a plan for follow-up by the local coordinator.

Legislative/Policy-Maker Breakasts are held in a conference room of a coalition member or a private room of a local restaurant before “professional” office hours. This time is very good for public officials, as well as many community leaders and volunteers—but not so good for working people with getting-children-off-to-school problems.

Small Community Meetings often are held in the evening or on the weekend in an accessible public place with parking and sometimes even childcare. The public nature of these meetings can be intimidating for some affected constituents who might need coaching and support to speak up. Avoiding stages and podiums and arranging chairs in big circles help newcomers feel more comfortable, and the public policy-maker more human and approachable.

Accountability Sessions usually are large-crowd affairs with the public officials up on a stage in full view and not talking . . . just listening. After at least an hour of problem and solution presentation by affected constituents and community leaders, the public officials’ responses are recorded on a large poster board mounted on the stage. Invited public officials who fail to attend these sessions sometimes are represented by an empty chair on stage with their name on it. As you might imagine, many public officials hate this format and will try to avoid coming. However, they will come if they know the local press is covering the event or that the sponsoring organization will be informing the community of their participation.

Victory Rallies/Award Ceremonies: Local public policy-makers who have helped to solve a community problem deserve a “thank-you party” reserved for local heroes. Sometimes combined with marches, bands, and music, these events are wonderful for affected constituents, who can soak up the support of community leaders and public officials alike. If you can’t get the local press to attend, be prepared to take your own photos for submission to the editors.

Follow-up Persuasion and Accountability Activities: Getting a commitment is one thing; holding public policy-makers to their commitment is another. It is critical to get all commitments down in writing, if not on tape, video, or TV. Follow-up phone calls also will be essential.

Letters: Public officials hate constituent form letters and love “Mom and Pop” letters that end with “God bless.” (Who doesn’t?) Good letters include a short personal story explaining the writer’s involvement in the public policy problem, offer the proposed solution, and then ask for a commitment to help. Good letters also include the full name and address of the writer. While it is true that legislators place a higher weight on letters from their own constituents, statewide administration officials and legislative leaders do pay attention to letters from affected constituents and community leaders on all state policy issues.
Calls: We advise calling public officials at their offices with a script handy. Use the above “Message Development Tool” and add a request that the public official get back to you with a reply. Don’t be disappointed if your public official isn’t available to take your call personally. The staff probably is more up to date on pending issues, anyway.

Petitions/Preprinted Post Cards: These are excellent public awareness activities but do little to persuade a public official. Politicians figure, and so do we, that almost everyone will sign almost everything just to get rid of the person circulating the petition or postcards. Calls and letters represent a real effort on the part of constituents—petitions and postcards do not.

E-mails: As this book goes to press, most public officials haven’t figured out how to value constituent e-mails yet. (Many of them still depend on staff to read or send their own internal e-mails.) It is especially important to include your correct name, address, and phone numbers in any e-mail communications with a public official; this enables them to respond to you via snail mail.

State Capital Activities

A large crowd event at the state capital or county seat can be empowering for participants in a public policy campaign. It’s exciting to be part of a huge gathering of all different kinds of people working on the same thing. It’s fun to see and hear your own organization’s leaders up on the podium with key players in the public policy arena. It also can be pretty discouraging when you get lost in the capital annex and are late for your ten-minute meeting with your own legislator, who ends up having to leave early for a roll call. Although we have already revealed our preference for district-based lobbying activities, nevertheless, we will tell you how to pull off a couple of state capital activities.

Lobby Days. Every organization likes to do its own lobby day to promote a specific legislative agenda. During legislative session, the state capital corridors are jammed with folks from different trade associations, each with their lobbying package ready to hand to their own legislator. Our best advice includes the following: choose an early morning time just before the session begins, find a keynote speaker (coalition leader or legislator) capable of making a stirring speech, help participants to call their own legislator for an appointment well before the lobby day, and prepare and distribute maps of the state capital that include handicapped accesses and bathrooms.

Legislative Briefing Sessions. Complex, complicated issues like health care and health prevention are perfect topics for an “issue briefing” for legislators and policy staff. These events can be scheduled through a friendly legislator in a room at the state capital or in a private conference space close to the state capital. This is a good time to display political support from prominent coalition members and show off factual support from policy experts from local universities or well-known think tanks. Although
it’s good to have one or two affected constituents telling their stories, this isn’t a large turnout event for the whole coalition.

**Victory Rally/Awards Ceremonies.** Every statewide public policy hero needs and deserves some recognition in the presence of peers and the state capital media. Many consumer organizations and trade associations have institutionalized an annual award ceremony in or around the state capital as a way to reward their friends with a bit of favorable public relations. One of the most critical elements here is the press photo that is sent to the awardees’ local papers as “hero proof positive.”

A SPECIAL NOTE ON HIRED GUNS

Sometimes, as Al Capone was fond of saying, “You can get more done with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone.” Fans of *The Untouchables* will find it easy to believe Al Capone employed guns to encourage stubborn bootleggers to engage in a little profit sharing with him, and only wonder if Capone wasted any time or effort uttering a few words, kind or otherwise.

Issue advocates new to the public policy arena, however, usually have plenty of words—single-spaced on piles and piles of paper. There are reports analyzing the issue and proposing practical solutions. Memos describe the affected constituencies and document their woes. Fiscal notes estimate the cost. All this adds up to an irresistible *Hero Opportunity* for a public official—if only they could get somebody to pay attention! And that’s why the first hired gun, or consultant, that newcomers look for is an experienced operative who can help them focus their campaign onto the appropriate public policy stage. Someone who knows the history and political dynamic between the executive and legislative branches. Someone who knows the hidden agendas of most of the key players. Someone who can help choose the perfect powerful person in desperate need of a *Hero Opportunity*.

Identifying potential hired guns is easy. After a few discreet inquiries, the word gets out among the professional political consultants, lobbyists, pollsters, and public relations specialists. Newcomers find themselves deluged with phone calls and proposals from well-known political operatives, all claiming to have immediate direct access to high level public officials. *Choosing the right consultant is another matter.* A political strategist’s primary “product” is hard to define and harder to evaluate. We will define it here as primarily an ability to predict the behavior of the players in the public policy arena as they are confronted with a developing public policy debate.

Political strategists use their intuition and imagination, informed by their institutional knowledge, direct experience, and observations. In fact,
a good political strategist brain is like a computer, with imagination and intuition serving as a specially designed program that processes all the incoming data—institutional knowledge, direct experience, and observations of individual players and their interactions. It’s fun to watch a bright consultant get all fidgety and excited just listening to a potential client’s proposed “hot-button” public policy campaign, hardly able to contain her or himself from giving away free advice. Another wonderful, but dampening, observation comes from academia, where consulting often is compared to teaching a required ethics course to graduate business students—one gets to show people consequential things they would rather not see, tell them consequential things they would rather not hear, and get paid for it.

Developing a scope of service job description and fee structure

Using a media consultant as an example, let’s start with the huge assumption that a particular public policy coalition already has developed a budget for the whole campaign. This coalition has a ballpark estimate for a media budget that includes a part-time person for six months. The salary is based on comparable staff salaries among member organizations that have the resources to have a media person at all. (There is nobody on the staff of any coalition member who can be freed up to do this.)

First, take the salary number in the budget and turn it into a six-month retainer payable monthly. Develop a straightforward job description that lists the specific tasks that the campaign would expect a part-time media person to carry out, write that up into a Request for Proposals, and start circulating it among consulting firms and freelancers. Campaign managers do not have to wait long to get good feedback from potential hired guns. Some will say straightaway that they can do it cheaper, if they can work out of their house and only come in two mornings a week. Others will say that they would be happy to sit at a desk in the campaign office, but the fee would have to be increased to cover fringe, a transportation allowance, plus lunch expenses. Still others will say that their firm requires the payment upfront. Any negotiated arrangements can be written into a simple contract or Memorandum Of Understanding outlining the work expectations, payment methods, and schedule.

A good support and accountability system can be managed by organizing the media people from member organizations, who can form an official media advisory committee to help choose the consultant and carry out a program of ongoing peer support and assistance. And then you’re ready to roll!
Author’s Preface: I originally wrote this article in 1981, when I was a new law school graduate and a community organizer in a previous life. I drew on some experiences that my mentor, the late Gary Bellow, had working with the United Farm Workers, as well as from issues that were hot at the time.

While I have revised this material somewhat where it needs updating, or to highlight additional issues that both organizers and legal advocates should consider, I have left much of it as it was in 1981.

There has been a fairly rich body of materials developed on community lawyering by advocates working in the community and with social movements over the past two decades. I can’t fairly summarize that work here—other than to say that both organizers and legal advocates should be on the lookout for it, and will find it to be very beneficial.

**Legal strategy can either empower or undermine grassroots organizations.** Organizers often see legal strategy as the kiss of death. They know that rather than relying on political strength, aggressive actions, and confrontations to build community leadership, reliance on “the law” as a solution can make group members dependent on the “professionals” and remove the initiative for action from their hands. The legal advocates may win the battle, while the organization, locked into drawn-out proceedings with little visible result, loses the war.

When legal advocates and organizers see eye to eye, though, use of the law can become an effective and rewarding part of an organization’s bag of tricks, one that isn’t relied upon as “the old standby” but that is there, along with the picket line and the surprise home visit, to be used by the organization with confidence when the time is ripe. The key is reaching a consensus between legal advocates and the organization that the legal strategy is part, and only part, of the tactical repertoire; and that, as much as possible, the legal strategy must be conceived as a means to the goal of building organization.

Legal strategy can be used to complement organizing objectives in several ways:

- A legal advocate can help the organization get information. There may be regulations, laws, or public information that the advocate identifies that
will inform the organization’s decision about which strategies to pursue. Information also can be obtained through litigation.

• The advocate can help members become knowledgeable and confident. He or she can break down complex issues or questions into understandable pieces and choices. With proper advance work, the advocate can bolster members’ willingness to take on certain “risks.” (For example, if there is a federal/state law that prohibits landlords from retaliating against tenant organizing, a simple explanation of this by an advocate, and an agreement to provide support if there are reprisals, may be key to helping tenants get organized.)

• The organization’s membership can become actively involved in tasks and enterprises that usually are seen as the legal advocate’s job, such as defining the purposes of a lawsuit, preparing affidavits, serving papers, and community education. Members can designate a “legal committee” that can help make decisions, particularly when they need to be made quickly.

• The organization’s work on the “outside” can complement the legal work being done by the advocate, and vice versa. For example, the legal advocate may obtain an injunction temporarily halting a bad result, but not be confident that the court will grant success on the merits. However, the legal delay gives the organization the time to put pressure on political decision-makers to come up with an acceptable long-term solution. By sharing information on the need for, and limitations of, each strategy, a good “tag-team” approach can be developed.

• There may be times when an organizing campaign has gone as far as it can, and the organization needs to turn its time and attention elsewhere, without conceding defeat or that it has “let go” of an issue. In such cases, legal action may allow the organization’s claims to proceed in another forum, with the hope of future vindication.

When deciding to use legal strategy in conjunction with an organizing campaign, the usual organizing caveats apply:

You need to achieve something immediate, specific, concrete, and realizable.

Unless the goal is to allow legal action to pick up for organizing energy that is being directed elsewhere, it is wise to pick prospective winners.

Thought should be given to the kinds of cases that can be brought to a head rapidly to avoid getting the organization bogged down in never-ending litigation.

In addition, organizers must also think defensively about the law. The opponent may know that by calling members in for depositions and prolonged hearings that take time away from employment or families, it can chip away the organization’s support. A wise organizing plan considers
what legal backup may be needed if the opponent resorts to a legal strategy to try to kill a campaign.

ESTABLISHING THE RELATIONSHIP

The first thing for organizers and legal advocates to do is to meet and establish a relationship. It is wise to find out what each group already is doing. Each group may find out that there are ways that they can work together that they didn’t anticipate. For example, a local legal services office may have been focusing on unfair practices by a utility company, but not known how it could find clients; the organizer, on the other hand, may have heard lots of complaints from members, but not known there was a legal “handle.”

It is also important to find out how much each party can devote in terms of resources—can the legal advocate come to a lot of night meetings, or only one a week? Will the campaign be peaking at a time when the advocate already is booked with other commitments? On the other hand, will the organization be busy with other campaigns at the time things might heat up in court? Who has translation resources, Xerox, and meeting space?

For many legal services programs, there is limited staff and funding, and ongoing case commitments, as well as case-acceptance priorities and constraints that may be imposed by funders. Since the mid-1990s, for example, federally funded legal services programs can’t take on a class action or represent undocumented immigrants. Finding out what these limits and priorities are will be helpful in deciding what help you can get from the organization and where you may need to seek help elsewhere.

Legal advocates also must insure that they will not have a conflict of interest. This may mean, for example, that if they already are working with one community organization, they won’t be able to help another organization whose goals might conflict, or where this might have a negative impact on the first group. Sometimes legal advocates will need to bring a number of different client groups together to make a decision and insure that there is no conflict—this may happen, for example, if there is pending legislation or a rules change. It is important for legal advocates to explain these prior commitments to community organizers to avoid later misunderstandings.

The “feeling-out” discussions between community organizers and legal advocates also have a psychological component. For the relationship to work well, there needs to be a level of underlying respect. Each side must be willing to be frank, and to express its reservations about a particular approach in a manner that is understandable. Oftentimes, good relationships continue for years. There should be sufficient trust so that each side doesn’t either say, “They don’t know what they’re talking about—that would be laughed out of court!” or “This is an organizing decision, pure and simple.” If there are drawbacks that one side or the other sees to an
approach, they should be aired—but in a way that doesn’t undercut the organization or the relationship (i.e., a conversation at the side of the hall, or after the meeting, rather than an announcement from the podium).

Reaching a clear understanding about how decisions will be made, and what are appropriate roles for the legal advocate, the organizer, and the membership, is very important. This should be discussed early and often. Groups can break up and/or there can be dissension, but the legal advocates may not be free to “walk away” from a case once it is filed, or blithely to disregard ethical obligations to whatever has been defined as “the client.” Defining how the advocates take direction when there’s dissension, or where there may be a broad group with differing interests and legal rights, is critical. This may mean focusing on bylaws and decision-making principles—things that may be seen by some organizers as boring, distracting, and dispiriting to newly energized members. But if the group hasn’t developed a process for working through these issues early on, it may be impossible to do so later—and the organization can wither as a result.

For all the parties, the long-term relationship often is critical: there may be rough spots and disappointments, but the value of working together and resolving difficulties to achieve future success cannot be overestimated. Mutual respect, and having a thick skin, can be critical in moving beyond personal issues and building community power.

PURPOSES AND PLAINTIFFS

The first task is for the legal advocate and the organization to decide together the purpose of filing a court or agency action. Is it publicity? Is it the threat of imposing higher financial costs or delay on the opposition unless it bargains with the organization? Is it to get information? Is it to supplement a political strategy? Is it to show support for an issue in the community, or to confer legal standing for a claim, without requiring much effort from the organization? Is it to allow the organization to retire gracefully from the scene of battle, without having to admit defeat, after it has exhausted its direct-organizing efforts? Is it to win a court order? Is it to get the opposition to think twice before engaging in retaliation against the organization?

The legal advocate may not always be willing to do what the organization thinks is needed—sometimes for very good reasons. Legal advocates must be wary. Many jurisdictions have adopted statutes to impose court costs and attorney’s fees on persons who file frivolous or spurious actions. In addition, the advocate’s right to practice law may be in peril if he or she is seen as promoting litigation with no merit. At a minimum, there must be a good faith claim that the people being sued have injured the organization in some way. In addition, even if there is merit to the claim, the
advocate may feel that a purely “technical” or “face-saving” claim isn’t worth pursuing in light of the other work that he or she could be taking on, or the case-acceptance priorities of the law office. If the legal advocate is in private practice, the cost of the legal work for the organization, or the advocate’s ability to carry on the work for long at a discounted rate, also must be factored in.

The legal advocate and the organization must have a clear sense of how far they want the legal strategy to go, and what the “backup” plan will be if initial legal strategies do not work. For example, if the organization seeks but does not obtain an injunction, is it prepared to file an appeal? Would this have the potential of making bad law, which could hurt the community and/or future organizing efforts? What if the case was assigned to a judge who is known not to be favorable to these types of claims? Is there other pressure that can be applied? Does the existence of the case in court, even if it hasn’t yet “won,” create enough pressure to force the opposition to make a legal settlement that the community wants?

Choosing the parties to participate in the legal strategy is another key decision. While it may be possible, for example, to file a class action suit, there may be both legal and organizational reasons to pursue suit only on behalf of a small group of individuals. Legally, an unfavorable ruling by a judge in a small group’s case will not necessarily stop another group from testing the same issues. Organizationally, a smaller group can be more helpful in leadership development.

The practice of using small suits to “feel out” the opposition and to get information that may be useful for later suits is common in the area of discrimination law. Bringing suits for individuals whose discrimination claims are not clear allows wide-open discovery that may open the doors for a subsequent broader legal action. It also may “soften up” the opposition, making them more amenable to a group settlement, rather than risking huge legal costs in defending against many individual lawsuits. National public interest groups have used the “small suit” idea to test which federal courts might be most open to hearing a particular kind of case; then a class action can be brought in the most favorable jurisdiction.

During the late 1960s, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) used small lawsuits in a way that helped develop new leadership. A housemeeting would be held where workers agreed to become plaintiffs in a suit. Then they would tell their story in other locations where workers were reluctant to organize for fear of retaliation. The new group, emboldened by the first group’s efforts, would get organized and often become involved in similar protective litigation. Had they used a class action suit, court proceedings would have entrenched the original leadership—but the UFW strategy continually drew in new members.

On the other hand, class actions can be effective in publicizing an organization’s efforts and as a means to identify particular constituencies. In
police misconduct cases, for example, the courts can be forced to notify all persons affected by the misconduct; when this happens, there will be opportunities for organization building. Class actions also can leverage compliance with demands: for example, if the police know that every time they commit an abuse, they will be hauled into court because of a pending order, it may tend to restrain their lawlessness. The key is to have the pieces in place so that once the affected people are identified, they readily can be brought together to develop group consciousness and common goals.

**MEMBERS’ ROLES**

There is room for a lot of organizational participation in the early stages of legal action. The legal advocate can take an initial draft of a complaint (or a bulleted fact sheet, breaking down the claims into simple terms) to the organization’s meeting to get the members’ ideas and approval. The language of the complaint can be flavored with the voice of the membership and can take on the spirit of the campaign of which it is a part. Copies of the complaint or excerpted portions can be used in press releases and public speeches, and for mass distribution. Any members of the organization may go as a group to file the complaint at the court clerk’s office.

Another way members can play an active role in litigation is by serving the complaints themselves. A number of jurisdictions provide that service on a defendant can be made by any adult over eighteen years of age, who is not party to the case (particularly where this is delivery to a corporate or agency office). This offers exciting opportunities: “I went right up to the door of that mansion. You should have seen the look on his face when he took the paper. I thought I was nothing compared to him, but he had to take that paper from me and see what we had planned for him.” This tactic has been used successfully in landlord-tenant cases and in employment suits.

Members also can play very direct roles by representing themselves *pro se* (by themselves) in court. The Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees self-representation, the right to appear in court or court-like proceedings without an attorney, if that’s what an individual wants to do. While usually it is better for individuals to be represented—and it is wisest for the organization to obtain legal representation—sometimes self-representation can be effective, as long as the individual knows what he or she is doing and how to present her or his claims. If it’s important to have the members tell their own story without a “mouthpiece,” and for the judge or the public to hear from individuals directly, self-representation may be the way to go.

In the case of a group, rights for self-representation may be more limited: for example, if the organization is incorporated, a number of states
bar corporations from appearing in most court proceedings without counsel. Where it is permitted, and the group decides to represent itself, be aware that there are limitations on using a legal advocate for assistance—in these cases, an advocate can continue to give advice, but not to the point of acting as “phantom counsel.” There is nothing wrong, however, with an organization getting legal help right up until the hearing and then firing its advocate, so it can present its story in its own way. (If the group wants future help from the advocate, make sure that this is an amicable parting!) This has been done successfully in civil disobedience cases stemming from the civil rights and antiwar movements.

Deciding on what members’ roles will be in a legal action depends on a number of factors—how complicated the legal issues are, the sympathies and biases of the court, what sort of relief is being sought in or outside of court, alternative strategies and resources, and the likely effect on the opposition.

**USING DISCOVERY TO SIZE UP THE OTHER SIDE**

One of the major ways in which use of the law can be helpful to organizing is supplying intelligence about the target—what is normally private information about financial resources, the ability to withstand certain losses, corporate and professional links with other individuals or entities, the existence of insurance coverage, and the like. While a non–legal advocate can uncover a lot of this information through tactical research (particularly in these days of the Internet), partnership with legal advocacy can increase access to potentially useful information. These data may be only peripheral to the objectives of the legal work, but can be crucial to an organizing campaign.

During the early days of California Rural Legal Assistance, the lawsuits brought by legal services advocates often had a spinoff effect on organizing by the UFW. Gary Bellow once brought suit for a worker who was fired for refusing to join the Teamsters, which the UFW viewed as a “company union” brought in to defeat farmworker efforts. In taking depositions from the grower, Bellow asked, “What subsidiaries do you have? What do you own? How many grapes do you ship? How many workers do you have that aren’t members of the union?” Bellow recalled, “Suddenly, the union realized a lawyer could get information that it couldn’t get any other way.”

Legal advocates must be prepared to show that the questions asked or the documents sought are relevant to the issues in the lawsuit. However, the information obtained need not itself be admissible in court, as long as it is calculated to lead to the uncovering of such evidence. A judge is likely to prohibit questions that seem like a fishing expedition—for example, asking about the landlord’s relationship to the local Democratic Party in a routine landlord-tenant case. However, if the case alleges collusion between
the city’s code enforcement unit and the landlord based on political connections, the court is likely to give you some leeway, as long as there is some good faith basis for the claims. Courts also recognize that discovery is a device to aid in case settlement, and thus encourage parties to use it to feel out each other’s bargaining range.

There are some particularly useful subject areas that are within the scope of discovery:

**Wealth and Assets**

If the law allows punitive damages, the opponent’s ability to pay may affect the amount that can be recovered in a suit. In addition, if damages are not paid immediately, many states have supplementary proceedings where you can identify assets and resources that can be used to pay off the debt. Early on in litigation, a party may want to place an attachment on property, or file a *lis pendens*, either to insure that assets that could pay a debt do not disappear or that others are aware that there is a legal dispute involving the property. Hence, questions about financial assets are relevant, although the court first may require that you demonstrate the right to recover damages. If your opponent hasn’t obeyed a court order and you are after a finding of contempt, you can ask for discovery *prior* to the court hearing, because the opponent may have alleged inability to pay as a defense.

**Insurance Coverage**

In states that have adopted the local equivalent of Rule 26(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, insurance coverage now generally is subject to discovery.

You can find out how much insurance the opponent carries, what company provides coverage, and the terms. (Some state laws require disclosure of such information without the need for litigation.)

**Corporate Relationships**

If your complaint has been drafted so that a number of different people are charged with causing harm, either directly or through their agents, relationships among the individuals and corporate connections are discoverable. Courts usually will not dismiss any of these parties until you have had the chance, through discovery, to sketch out the relationships between them.

It can be empowering for members of an organization to be in on the discovery process, helping to identify questions and information they want the opposition to disclose. Members also may want to participate in
depositions. In the absence of any statute or court ruling to the contrary, parties to an action have the right to be present and ask questions at the deposition. The lawyer for the other side may object, or the opponent may refuse to answer, but the opportunity to confront the opponent on a relatively equal footing across the table—to ask questions the community has wondered about for so long—presents an exciting opportunity. Where the opposition never has met face-to-face with the community, this opportunity may break down some barriers and could become a prelude to future meetings at a bargaining table.

Absent a court rule or decision to the contrary, there is no limit to the number of persons who can attend a deposition, so long as they are persons named in the suit. The place of the deposition is subject to the wishes of both sides. But if, for example, a landlord agrees to hold a deposition on the site of the apartment complex, only to have 100 tenants show up ready to grill him with questions, it’s too late to object to holding the deposition there. There is room here for creative use of community pressure within the legal forum while playing by the rules.

Depositions have other effects as well. In depositions, both the opponent and his or her attorney’s time are tied up by answering your questions. Splits between the opponent and counsel may appear at such a face-to-face meeting, and subtle nuances picked up at these sessions may be invaluable in future negotiations, as well as give insights into the psychology of the people you are dealing with.

CAVEATS

As a precaution, lawyers and organizers should keep in mind that the same tactics can be used by both sides. No one has a monopoly on cleverness, and any “trick” you can pull on them, they can pull on you. In the Tenants First organizing effort in Massachusetts in the early 1970s, a HUD subsidized developer filed a civil conspiracy suit against numerous tenants for interfering with his economic relationships. The developer’s attorneys summoned tenants to depositions one by one and continued the depositions day after day, imposing economic hardship on the tenants who were kept away from work. Tenants tried collective action to fight back and avoid isolation, showing up at each other’s depositions, but the suit took its toll. The organizers cited the suit as one of the main factors in the breakup of the organization.

Either side may find that information obtained through court actions (“discovery”), or the very existence of a court action, can be useful in a campaign. Generally, discovery is regarded as “privileged information,” not for general consumption, but usually there is nothing to prevent an organization from broadcasting what it has learned. Barry Greever’s
*Tactical Investigations for People’s Struggles* suggests investigating all past court cases against individual and corporate targets to see if there are any juicy tidbits in materials from those cases. While court records normally are public, discovery materials often may not be kept in the public court files (this varies by court rules). You may have to see if there are friendly parties handling a case who are willing to share any of the materials (sometimes such disclosure may be barred by a court order). Information that you obtain can be plastered on flyers and posters as easily as the salaries of top executives that you obtain from Securities and Exchange Commission records. Discovery items can be excerpted for dramatic effect, but some context should be supplied to avoid the risk of a libel or slander suit. On the other hand, leadership of your organization must be aware that the other side will try to dig up “skeletons in the closet” in the same way to undercut the organization’s credibility with the general public or with its own membership.

**TO BEGIN**

Before an organization gets involved in litigation, it is important to size up the possibility of conflict during the course of the case, either between the organized group’s interests and those of the individuals who may be concerned, or between the group and the class of plaintiffs who will bring the suit. A collection of suing plaintiffs, once named on a complaint, has a way of taking on a life of its own.

Under the Code of Professional Responsibility, a legal advocate working with a group has an ongoing duty to zealously advocate for all its members and not shortchange any individual. If a conflict develops between different clients’ interests, the advocate may not be able to decide to represent only one point of view. While the organization might choose to resolve conflicts by majority rule, if there is a class action, the court may decide to create subgroups with differing interests. To avoid these problems, legal advocates and organizational leaders and staff should be aware of the possibility from the start, and design the legal strategy with an eye toward preventing possible conflicts. One approach is to include the organization itself as a party to the litigation, and to make sure that the other individual plaintiffs understand that the legal advocate shares a duty to both the individuals and the organization.

It’s no easy task to get legal advocates and organizers to appreciate each other’s approaches. But with some understanding of how use of the law can work to organizational advantage, and with a fair degree of mutual respect and commitment, extremely fruitful long-term relationships can be set up, which both build community power and work toward justice.
MEDIA RELATIONS

Eric Weltman

The media can be an important tool for activists—both to promote their organizations and advance their causes. This section will provide a brief overview of tactics and tips for obtaining good media coverage.

MEDIA’S IMPORTANCE

It is important to first consider why media coverage is important. Media coverage can:

- Educate the general public about a problem, be it pollution or poverty, and its solution(s).
- Pressure decision-makers (e.g., a letter to the editor urging a representative to support a bill).
- Show levels of support (for example, a newspaper photograph of hundreds of people at a rally).
- Provide public visibility for a group or organization.
- Promote an event (for example, a notice about an upcoming meeting).
- Show donors the work you are doing (a nice front-page story in a local newspaper is great to include in fundraising appeals).
- Involve people in your work (for example, by inviting important local officials or new coalition partners in a press conference).

An important conclusion should be drawn from this: Using the media is a tactic that should be considered during a group’s planning, whether it’s for a yearlong legislative campaign or an annual fundraising event. Just like fundraising, media always should “be at the table” for all of a group’s strategic discussions.

DEFINING A MESSAGE

The most important task in media outreach is framing a message. A message is a short, simple statement that defines what the issue or problem is,
what you want to happen, and who you want to take action. The message should be easy to understand and ought to resonate with the average person who may not know much about your issue.

For example: “The Smallville incinerator is dangerous, expensive, and unnecessary. We urge Governor Smith to save our health and our tax dollars by closing it now.”

Good messages often appeal to popular values and ideals, such as fairness, common sense, and caring for others. An organization’s message should be incorporated into all outreach materials, such as leaflets, press releases, signs, and Web sites. Consistently repeating your message this way will help people remember it and believe it.

**TYPES OF MEDIA OPPORTUNITIES**

Basically, there are three ways to get into the media.

- The first is to publish or broadcast your own content. This can be accomplished by submitting to a newspaper letters or op/ed pieces that you or your group have written. It also can be done—more expensively, of course—by paying for advertisement.

- The second way is by submitting information to a news outlet, usually via media release or a press event. Examples include a media release announcing new data about local pollution sources, or an event launching a new coalition.

- The third way is by organizing a news event that demands coverage. The most obvious example for activists is a rally or protest.

There are many different kinds of media and, within each, many opportunities to get coverage. It is important not to focus solely on scoring a front-page story in the regional daily newspaper, or a lead story on the television news. For example, among newspapers, there are large regional dailies (such as the *Boston Globe* or the *Miami Herald*). But there also are local daily newspapers and town weekly newspapers. Additionally, there are the “wire services,” such as the Associated Press, which provides stories to these papers. And within these papers there is, of course, the front-page news. But usually there is also local news, letters to the editor, an op/ed page, an editorial page, columnists, upcoming events, and a “human interest” section—all important opportunities for grassroots groups.

Within the electronic media, there are whole universes of opportunities—among them, television news, talk shows, cable access shows, public service announcements (PSAs) on local radio, e-mail listservs, and websites.
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor are an excellent tool for activists. The “LTE” page often is the most widely read section of a newspaper. Groups can demonstrate the popularity of their cause by flooding their local paper with letters. Handing out a sample letter to activists can be helpful—although each letter should be modified so they don’t all appear to be “canned.” The shorter a letter is, the more likely it will be published—and the more likely it will be read. But a good letter should contain the group’s message—what the issue is and who needs to do what. It can also give out contact information, such as a website, organizational name, and phone number.

MEDIA EVENTS

Media events can be a fun way to involve people and obtain media coverage. Ideally, a media event should have as many of the following characteristics as possible:

A. New Information: This could include launching a new campaign, new data about a problem, or new evidence of support, such as signed petitions.

B. Interesting Participants: Often, who is involved can be as important—and appealing to the media—as what is being said. For example, local VIPs, such as clergy or elected officials, can attract media. Other examples include celebrities, people personally affected by an issue, and “strange bedfellows”—unlikely coalition partners, such as a conservative businessman joining an antipoverty campaign. Also, children are great magnets for the media.

C. Interesting Location: It’s one thing to hold a press conference about pollution outside city hall—and another to hold it in front of a power plant. Keep in mind, however, that the media are reluctant to travel very far for events.

D. A News Peg: A “news peg” is another event that is already happening, and you can “hang” your event onto it. A good (and common) example is holding a rally outside a political party convention.

E. Stunts, Gimmicks, and/or Visuals: Not surprisingly, these are particularly useful for attracting television coverage. Some examples include costumes (i.e., dressing as pigs to mock greedy politicians) and props (i.e., barrels with radioactive symbols to illustrate nuclear waste). The media also like scorecards, grades, and rankings, such as giving an elected official a “D” for education, or designating certain polluters “the Filthy Five” or “the Dirty Dozen.”
Two other good ingredients are conflict and emotional impact. The media loves conflict—particularly when it involves “good guys” versus “bad guys,” or “David” going up against “Goliath.” The media—and the public—also are more likely to be interested in a story if it has emotional impact. Data about poverty are easy to forget—but the story and picture of a hungry child are not.

**STEPS TO HOLDING A MEDIA EVENT**

There are three basic steps to holding a media event: planning, organizing, and publicizing. Perhaps the most important thing is to give yourself the necessary time to plan, organize, and publicize the event.

**A. Plan the Event**
- **What** is the message?
- **Who** should deliver the message? Who should the speakers be?
- **How** should the message be delivered? Do you want to organize a stunt, or produce a series of charts?
- **Where** should the event be held?
- **When** should the event be held? Best days are early in the week, and worst are on Fridays and weekends. The best times are early in the day. But make sure there are no (or few) conflicts with other events.

**B. Organize the Event**
- Carry out the plan. This could take as long as three weeks, particularly if you are inviting VIPs to participate, choreographing a stunt, or designing and printing materials, such as banners, charts, or signs.
- It is crucial that all speakers be well “prepped,” or prepared. Obviously, it’s difficult to instruct a congressman on what to say. But the more that your speakers stick to the message, the better.

**C. Publicize the Event**
- Fax and/or e-mail the media advisory to local news services (such as the Associated Press) at least a week before the event—they may have a weekly calendar of events. Make a follow-up call to ensure that they received the advisory.
- Call or e-mail your supporters about the event. Even if your members are not participating in the event, they may enjoy attending. Also, the media will be impressed by the show of support.
- Fax and/or e-mail the advisory a day before the event. Send it to reporters that you know, as well as the “assignment editors” at newspapers,
television, and radio stations. Make reminder calls to make sure they received it.

- Make reminder calls the day of the event.

At the event itself, make sure the media who attend sign in. You can make calls and send a media release to those who did not attend.

**WRITING A MEDIA ADVISORY AND A MEDIA RELEASE**

The purpose of an advisory is to inform the media about an upcoming event. It should be EXTREMELY brief and to the point. It should have a simple headline (i.e., Rally to Oppose Incinerator). Below it, in outline form, should be a brief (2–3 sentences) explanation of “what” (what’s happening), “who” (who is speaking, performing, or otherwise involved), “where,” and “when.” Perhaps most important, provide contact information—a name and phone number in big, bold letters.

The purpose of a release is to provide reporters all the information you want them to have—and publish—about a story. In fact, it should be written like the story that you would like to see appear. And, if the reporter is lazy or overworked, it may very well be the story that gets published! It should not be more than one page. A media release should contain the following:

- Date and contact information on top.
- Attention-grabbing headline below.
- Introductory paragraph that gives the basics: what, when, who, where, and why.
- Quotes from people that restate and support your message. These quotes could be from your group’s leaders, affected individuals, coalition partners, and/or VIPs.
- Supporting information, such as data.
- Information about the group or coalition.

It is the convention to mark the end of a media release by typing “###” or “-30-.”

**OTHER TIPS**

Some other helpful pointers:

- Use very simple language when communicating with the media (and through the media to the public).
• Avoid complex detail. It likely will bore or turn off reporters, and probably won’t make it into the story anyhow.

• Do not exaggerate. This is a tendency that activists have because we are so passionate about our issues. But hyperbole destroys credibility.

• Do not be afraid to say “I don’t know” to a reporter. If someone asks a question that you feel is important to answer, you always can get back to them.

• Stick to the message. Repeat and restate your basic message over and over again.

• Don’t be afraid to not answer a reporter’s questions. If a reporter asks a question that is “off the topic,” you are not required to answer it. You can respond by saying something like: “The important issue is . . .” and then say what you want to say.

• Use a script, if necessary, to ensure that you stick to your message and main talking points. That one silly or stupid comment that you make could wind up in print!

• At any media event—even if it’s not a rally or major turnout event—it’s good to have at least ten or more supporters there, just so you don’t appear marginal.

• At any media event—or whenever you are speaking to a reporter—have something visual and visible that identifies you with your organization, such as a banner and/or button.

• Keep in mind that you don’t have to organize an “event” to get coverage for your issue. This particularly is the case if there is nothing visual to attract television. Oftentimes, a media release can suffice for newspaper coverage.

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USING TECHNOLOGY FOR
GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

Maria Roberts-DeGennaro

Regardless of their size, grassroots organizations are facing the same challenges in carrying out their mission with limited resources, communicating the issues they advocate to their members and to the media, and raising the funds to sustain their organizing efforts. Boeder (2002) suggests that the Internet offers new tools and promising opportunities for mastering these challenges. This article provides some “nuts and bolts” for using technology for grassroots organizing, as well as references to several sources that have contributed to the literature related to these new tools. At the end of the article, an appendix lists a range of websites that can be explored as sources of information for navigating through cyberspace.

MOTIVATING FACTORS TO USE TECHNOLOGY

Grassroots organizing usually revolves around mobilizing a local population to take action or educating the public about policy issues. Building relationships and creating networks are the key ingredients in grassroots organizing. Changes in the political landscape are transforming the ways in which organizers network, exchange information and ideas, and link with people in their communities and across communities. Web-based tactics, e-mail–based strategies, and other approaches are changing how we plan and implement advocacy campaigns.

Fitzgerald and McNutt (1999) define electronic advocacy as the use of information and communications technology to disseminate information to and mobilize support from a large constituency to influence decision-making processes. McNutt and Hick (2002, p. 75) have investigated the rise of electronic advocacy and believe four factors are motivating organizers to use technology—primarily the Internet:

1. Economics: The time and resources needed to contact people and coordinate their activities are driving many organizations to consider alternative approaches, such as using the Internet, for getting their message across and for moving forward with organizing campaigns and other
efforts. We will need to consider the transaction costs of organizing some of these activities and then assess whether the use of technology will help cut these costs. The shrinking resource base in many organizations is going to make it fiscally necessary to use the Internet, regardless of whether an organization is reluctant to engage in cyberspace.

2. Distance and Devolution: The continued dispersal of the power structure and the geographical scale of problems that affect people wherever they live make the Internet a powerful ally for organizing. Globalization of the world economy is, in part, facilitated by technology. We will need to think about how grassroots organizations digitally can connect with people around the world who share common concerns and causes. Tapping into the storeroom of technological tools and operating within cyberspace could enlarge the power base of leaders and organizers who are running campaigns for social change.

3. New Capacities: Technology is a tool that grassroots organizations can use to communicate with constituents and then organize them to advocate for social change. However, “staying on top” by investing in the new tools that continually are being developed poses a challenge to these organizations. Costs for such technology tools need to be factored into fundraising efforts, in order to close the “digital divide” that is threatening many of our grassroots organizations and making them invisible to funding sources.

4. Realization that Cyberspace is a New Constituency: The growth in the technologically driven workplace, as well the population that has turned toward the Internet for interaction, means that organizers need to “start where the community members are,” and that might be in cyberspace.

**TECHNIQUES FOR ELECTRONIC ADVOCACY**

Historically, community organizing evolved in a social and economic context that is fundamentally different from the present political environment. Some of the traditional organizing tools, such as public testimonies, telephone calls, letter writing, and face-to-face meetings with decision-makers, might not be sufficient to achieve our current goals. Today, technology can be used to create innovative tactics and techniques for promoting social and economic justice and empowering oppressed, disenfranchised, and forgotten people (Haskett, 2002). However, technology should not be a *substitute* for direct organizing, but instead should be *one of the tools that leaders and organizers use to get the job done*. Face-to-face communication still is essential in grassroots organizing.

E-mail–based strategies—for example, listservs—are effective for distributing materials and exchanging information. The use of a listserv, which is a type of software that automatically manages computer mailing
lists, such as discussion groups on the Internet, has extended and expanded how organizations communicate. Schwartz (2002) contends that online petitions are emerging as the most common vehicle for advocacy on the Internet. These can be generated and circulated online to an organization’s e-mail list and then distributed rather quickly to listservs and other links.

Online campaigns or *flash campaigns* can be organized to start a movement or fight one, such as lobbying for or against a specific bill. These campaigns also can be organized out of a single incident or around a specific issue, such as the Censure and Move On (MoveOn, n.d.) flash campaign that generated more than 250,000 phone calls and a million e-mails to Congress around a single cause, namely, reaching closure on the Clinton scandal. Mounting a campaign on the Internet requires a data management system that organizers can use to recruit volunteers, build relationships, poll constituents, and so on. Once a flash campaign is developed, action should be initiated while the issue still is “hot” and all the involved parties are “keyed up” to do their part.

Web-based techniques, such as Webcasting and websites, also are useful strategies. Webcasting requires the user to install software in order to receive material that is transmitted over the Internet, for example, from a host serving as an electronic advocacy base. Websites serve as “virtual libraries” that provide information and advocacy alerts, connect to related links, or extend an organization’s fundraising activities. However, many of these sites currently aren’t accessible to people with a full range of disabling conditions (Sarnoff, 2001). If grassroots organizers intend to develop a website for their organization, they should use the first-level priorities in the W3C (1999) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to construct the site. These accessibility guidelines were developed by a private group of experts from government, academia, and software concerns in an effort to enhance the functionality and universality of the World Wide Web.

Boland, Bartron, and McNutt (2002) suggest that fax, fax on demand, and conference calls are other approaches for conducting advocacy activities through the Internet. Emerging technologies, such as video-teleconferencing and streaming video, are being developed and tested for electronic advocacy practice. These authors contend that future methodologies for this new form of practice include neural networks, data mining, and data warehousing. (I think we’ll need a few techies among us in order to “get onboard” with these latter technological advances.)

Consequently, organizers need good assessment skills to determine whether it makes sense to use technology along with, or instead of, mass mailings and telephone calls. Regardless, the shifting political landscape and the availability of electronic tools will contribute to the emergence and the growth of opportunities to engage in electronic advocacy.
COMMUNITY COMPUTER NETWORKS

Grassroots organizations can design and construct community computer networks to ensure access to technology and the Internet, create community free space for public debate and discussion, provide public information, and facilitate community building (Downing et al., 1991; McNutt, 2000; Nartz and Schoech, 2000).

One of the more important missions of community computer networks is to reach low-income people and provide them with access to information technology. This can include training in the use of computers, as well as access to computers via public terminals in libraries, community centers, social agencies, and kiosks (Fitzgerald and McNutt, 1999).

Grassroots leaders and organizers can use computer networks to provide constituents with access to (1) electronic mail and the Internet, (2) information related to government and private-sector services, and (3) opportunities to participate in public debates around proposed legislation and social policies (Roberts-DeGennaro, 2002). Mary’s (2001) study confirmed the importance of networks in influencing involvement in political change.

BARRIERS TO USING TECHNOLOGY

The use of technology can expand and revitalize opportunities for grassroots organizing (Roberts-DeGennaro and Mizrahi, 2004). Schoech (1999) contends that organizers and other community members quickly can educate themselves using linked websites, advocate via online petitions and flash campaigns, and stage Internet awareness-raising events, such as virtual conferences and protests. However, Schoech also suggests that Internet technology has not been used extensively due to cost, time, and the expertise needed to develop and maintain applications. Many grassroots organizations don’t have the resources or the skills to purchase, implement, and then support a technological approach to advocacy. I will stress again the importance of organizations itemizing expenses for technology into their fundraising activities. Granting bodies expect to see these items in a budget, as it demonstrates computer competency on the part of the organization seeking the funds.

Sherraden, Slosar, and Sherraden’s (2002) study found that maintaining regular communication with individuals and small agencies in urban and rural areas without computer access was challenging. The technological infrastructure must be developed and then continually updated in order for leaders and organizers to use electronic advocacy techniques. The costs of upgrading technological equipment is one of the major constraints for reducing the “digital divide” within grassroots
organizations. Unless there is an item budgeted, allocated, and accessible for upgrades, we will continually struggle to maintain a presence in our communities.

Steyaert (2002) contends that **physical access** to technology isn’t enough to enable the Internet to have a significant impact on social change. Literacy issues also can pose barriers to both grassroots organizers and their constituents even if they have access to technology, including:

1. **Technology literacy**: People need the skills to operate the technology and maneuver through cyberspace.
2. **Information literacy**: People need the ability to search for relevant information and then translate that information to their own life situation in order to participate in electronic advocacy.
3. **Language literacy**: People need to have a fairly high level of reading skills in English, which is the dominant language even on a global scale, in order to access information on the Internet.

**FINAL NUT AND BOLT**

The Internet and other telecommunications allow for less hierarchical place- and space-based interorganizational structures to emerge (Klein, 2000). Thus, community organizing in cyberspace might shift the balance of power so that it is shared between those in the established power structure and the disenfranchised, especially as grassroots groups seek and enlist allies and experts from around the world (Blundo, Mele, Hairston, and Watson, 1999).

Even though grassroots organizers might work through the Internet, activists still need to be tied to traditional strategies of community practice. An organizer usually connects with a local neighborhood group or organization in the physical world in order to make any means of communication work, such as electronic advocacy. Therefore, technology should be used to complement traditional methods of organizing.

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**ONLINE RESOURCES**

The following websites are sources of information for community practitioners. Since the Internet constantly is changing and growing, no list ever will be complete or up to date. Because of link rot, some sites may have closed, moved, or changed when these finally are accessed by the reader. This list of sites is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to suggest what types of Internet resources might be available.

**Advocacy and Social Change**

Advocacy Institute  
http://www.advocacy.org

Center for Equal Opportunity  
http://www.ceousa.org

Charity Lobbying for the Public Interest  
http://www.clpi.org

Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility  
http://www.cpsr.org

Digital Empowerment  
http://www.digitalempowerment.org

Essential Information  
http://www.essential.org

Institute for Global Communications  
http://www.igc.org

National Association of Social Workers  
http://www.naswdc.org

National Civic League  
http://www.ncl.org

OMB Watch  
http://www.ombwatch.org
RESULTS
http://www.results.org

Threshold Foundation
http://www.thresholdfoundation.org

**Community Development and Networking**

Alliance for Community Technology
http://www.communitytechnology.org

Association for Community Organization and Social Administration (ACOSA)
http://www.acosa.org

Association for Progressive Communications
http://www.apc.org

Center for Community Change
http://www.communitychange.org

Chicago Video Project
http://www.chicagovideo.com

Comm-Org
http://comm-org.utoledo.edu

Community Development Housing Foundation
http://www.cdhf.8m.com

Community Development Society
http://www.comm-dev.org

Housing and Urban Development's Office of Community Planning and Development
http://www.hud.gov/cpd/c2020ad.html

Idealist (Action without Borders)
http://www.idealist.org

National Association of Development Organizations
http://www.nado.org

National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Office of Telecommunications and Information Applications
http://www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/otiahome.html

Neighbor Works
http://www.nw.org
Pacific Web: Internet Community Development
http://www.virtualcommunity.com

Discussion Groups
Comm-Org Colist
http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/mailman/listinfo/colist

Idealist (Action without Borders) Community
http://www.idealist.org/bbs/cgi-bin/wwwthreads.pl?SID=ddc045156df0df4f99319d8eb33fffd37

Social Work Access Network: Listservs
http://www.sc.edu/swan/listserv.html

Tech Soup Community
http://www.techsoup.org/community/index.cfm?cg=home&sg=community

Federal Government Sources
First Government
http://www.firstgov.gov

Thomas @ Library of Congress
http://thomas.loc.gov

United States Census Bureau
http://www.census.gov

United States House of Representatives
http://www.house.gov

United States Senate
http://www.senate.gov

United States White House
http://www.whitehouse.gov

Guides and Indexes
Charity and Community Service
http://www.einet.net/galaxy/Community/Charity-and-Community-Service.html

Foundation Center
http://fdncenter.org

Guide Star
http://www.guidestar.org
Internet Archive
http://web.archive.org

Praxis (Resources for Social and Economic Development)
http://www.ssw.upenn.edu/~restes/praxis.html

Social Work Access Network
http://www.sc.edu/swan

Social Work and Social Services Web Sites
http://128.252.132.4/websites.html

World Wide Web Resources for Social Workers
http://www.nyu.edu/socialwork/wwwrsuw

Nonprofits: Resources

Board Source
http://www.ncnb.org

Center for Civic Networking
http://www.civic.net:2401/ccn.html

Hands Net
http://www.handsnet.org

Independent Sector
http://www.independentsector.org

Internet Nonprofit Center
http://www.nonprofits.org

Issue Dynamics Incorporated: Consulting Services
http://idi.net

National Housing Institute
http://www.nhi.org

Network for Good
http://www.networkforgood.org

Non-Profit Internet Handbook
http://www.socialworker.com/nonprofit/npinter.htm

Nonprofit Quarterly
http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org

Support Center for Nonprofit Management
http://www.supportcenter.org

Tech Soup
http://www.techsoup.org
Policy

Alliance for Justice
http://www.allianceforjustice.org/nonprofit/index.html

Center for Law and Social Policy
http://www.clasp.org

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
http://www.cbpp.org

Moving Ideas: Electronic Policy Network
http://movingideas.org

Urban Institute
http://www.urban.org

Research

Aging Center for Communication and Consumer Services
http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/naic

Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA)
http://www.arnova.org

Brookings Institution
http://www.brook.edu

Federal Statistics
http://www.fedstats.gov

Institute for Research on Poverty
http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp

Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research
http://www.iaswresearch.org

National Center for Health Statistics
http://www.cdc.gov/nchswww

National Institute of Mental Health Research Activities
http://www.nimh.nih.gov/research/index.cfm

Society for Social Work and Research
http://www.sswr.org

United States Department of Health and Human Services Research and Data
State Government Sources

Influencing State Policy
http://www.statepolicy.org

National Conference of State Legislatures
http://www.ncsl.org

Stateline
http://www.stateline.org
NEGOTIATIONS: USING A WEAPON
AS A WAY OUT

Mark J. Splain

Virtually everyone, regardless of income or class status, has some instinctive understanding and some learned expertise in “bargaining” to settle an individual dispute and reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. Likewise, it is common for organizations of all types to engage in collective bargaining as a way to resolve conflict over an issue or issues. But when community organizations representing low- and moderate-income constituencies pursue explicit negotiations with their adversaries, prospects for victory and organizational growth may not always increase, while the complexity of the campaign and stakes of the game almost always will. Thus, a decision to negotiate should be considered carefully based on a clear understanding of the principles and dynamics of formal bargaining.

TO BARGAIN OR NOT TO BARGAIN

There are specific points of time in certain campaigns when it is tactically prudent to consider negotiations as a tool either to win the fight or to move the campaign another step forward. Generally speaking, there are five cases where negotiations are more likely to be an asset than a liability.

First is when direct action already has produced sufficient concessions, but the target has managed to avoid written guarantees and/or the membership has failed to recognize that the victory indeed has been won. Negotiations here serve to concretize and formalize what has already been won in battle.

Second is where significant concessions have been won, but because of the tactics, the media, or other factors, the organization hasn’t been identified with the results. Negotiations here validate organizational ties to the terms of the settlement, giving the organization credit for the victory.

Third is when engaging the target in formal talks likely will result in (1) a weakening of the adversary’s position or power, (2) a strengthening of the organization’s position or power, or (3) a net gain in support for the organization’s position from relevant third parties. This is the most common use that organizers envision for negotiations, because here is where they produce an obvious incremental shift in power—ideally sufficient to win the campaign.
Fourth is where the campaign dictates a delusive tactic. Negotiations here are utilized as a break from the action, as a delay while some external factor or event develops, or simply as a tactic to confuse and confound the adversary, who nevertheless must be convinced that the organization has positive, good faith motives in seeking negotiations.

Fifth is when negotiations provide the last best hope for obtaining information on the plans and motives of the target. The purpose here is not to extract concessions, but to gather intelligence that badly is needed to engage (the membership) in effective action.

More often than not, conditions and factors suggest that negotiations will be an effective tool to win a given campaign. However, there are five situations, in particular, where negotiations should be avoided at all costs.

First is where the corporate or governmental opponent clearly possesses the capability to outmaneuver your bargaining team and/or your membership. Never risk bargaining away what has been or could be secured.

Second is when the talks are viewed by either your adversary or your leadership as strictly informative and advisory in nature. Never bargain when there are no binding consequences to either side.

Third is where the preconditions, such as a cessation of direct action, are organizationally too costly. Never bargain when the entry fee into the room makes the ultimate victory unaffordable.

Fourth is when the talks will not likely end with a specific agreement, but rather will result in an ongoing “planning” process. Never bargain away the right to engage in action and build organization through conflict.

Fifth is where the current internal dynamics of the organization suggest that the bargaining team probably will not be held accountable to the self-interests of the membership and/or the constituency. Never bargain to benefit individuals within the organization over the membership at large.

In addition to these strategic considerations, an organization also either must “engage” or “be engaged” in a decision to enter formal negotiations. The four most common methods have relative advantages, depending on the specifics of the campaign.

An organization can wait for or anticipate an adversary’s offer to bargain and then accept with genuine or fabricated enthusiasm or reluctance. Here the organization must be able to afford not only the wait but also the possibility that no offer will be made.

Or an organization can structure an offer to bargain that is perceived by the membership as a move of strength and by the opponent as one of conciliation. Here the organization must be able to afford a refusal to bargain by the other side.

Bargaining can be an explicit demand of the campaign supported by direct action, by the threat of action, or simply by moral arguments. Here the
organization must be in a position to capitalize immediately on either acceptance or refusal of the demand.

Finally, an organization can organize behind the scenes to have a third party or parties request that both sides agree to enter negotiations. However, the consequences of such “orchestration” becoming public may be highly detrimental to the outcome.

The question of whether or not to bargain formally requires a final, but most fundamental, consideration. It is imperative that the other side agree to terms and conditions that justify an organizational expectation of good faith bargaining. Specifically:

- The organization must be dealt with directly as the exclusive bargaining agent for purposes of these talks on these issues;
- The explicit goal of the talks must be to reach a formal, written agreement;
- Both parties must clearly understand what are the negotiable and non-negotiable issues; and
- Both parties must already understand the preconditions to beginning talks, if any.

**SHAPING THE TABLE AND THE TEAM**

The preliminary work that takes place prior to substantive negotiations is so critically important that often it determines the outcome of the talks. There are the two sets of tasks that must be accomplished prior to commencing bargaining. The first is getting organized. Formalizing the bargaining committee and thoroughly preparing for the negotiations require a more serious detailed effort than preparation for any single action or leadership meeting. The second set of tasks is to secure favorable terms, that is, setting ground rules so that the other side is locked into the talks in such a way that the negotiations, once begun, will focus on issues, not process. Both sets of tasks are extremely important, but getting the bargaining team into shape must be completed before meeting with the other side to settle on the shape of the table.

There are seven areas of organizational planning, preparation, and training that precede bargaining:

1. The organization must determine the general makeup of the bargaining committee, as well as the specific election or selection process. Once the team has been designated, there should be a formal decision establish-
ing a mechanism through which the committee will be accountable to
the membership for any changes in its makeup.

2. The organization, not just the bargaining committee, must reach con-
sensus on the time limit allowed for bargaining to achieve its purposes
before the membership reevaluates the basic decision to engage in
negotiations.

3. An accountability mechanism must be established through which the
committee will keep the membership informed on an ongoing basis and,
on occasion, seek votes regarding various bargaining positions.

4. The basic formalization of demands and possible bottom lines is estab-
lished by the membership, but the specific details of both are drawn up
by the committee.

5. The question of nonbargaining campaign activity, such as use of the
media during the negotiation period, should be resolved by the bar-
gaining committee with input from the membership.

6. The committee must devote one or more preparatory sessions specifi-
cally to role-playing, research, and record-keeping skills.

7. The committee must discuss and agree upon specific roles for each in-
dividual member to play, including the organizer, as well as agree on the
use of caucuses for decision-making purposes.

Once the bargaining committee has completed its preparatory work,
the initial meeting with the other side can take place in order to set
the ground rules. There are five important items on the agenda for this
session.

1. Request any and all relevant information that the committee feels it
needs to put forward proposals and bargain in good faith. Attempt to
stipulate any facts or findings that will eliminate delays or wasted time
in actual bargaining on the front end.

2. Reach agreement on an overall timetable, a specific schedule with dates
and times, and a bargaining location—all three on terms most advanta-
geous to the organization.

3. Require the other side to identify their bargaining team and clarify any
questions of authority or accountability.

4. Reach agreement on the question of open or closed bargaining, that is,
whether respective memberships are eligible to sit in to observe but not
participate.

5. Agree on nonbargaining activity, such as the use of media, while the bar-
gaining process is underway.
The committee must determine that it has secured sufficiently satisfactory terms in regard to all these ground rules before proceeding with substantive negotiations.

**LEARNING A DOZEN DIFFERENT DIALECTICS**

The operational principles and working dynamics of bargaining are learned more easily through direct experience rather than in educational sessions. Bargaining committees will succeed in part based on their relative level of skills and experience. But bargaining is a dialectical process, and the most dangerous mistake is to assume that any single approach is either universally successful or unsuccessful. In fact, the nature of the enterprise dictates that the participants not only follow the dialectical movements of the process but also gain a measure of control over it. This is possible only when there is a solid understanding of the important “struggles” commonly waged simultaneously by both sides.

*Active versus Reactive Positioning:* Each side has an agenda to move, as well as one to protect. Generally, the more aggressively your bargaining team controls the agenda at the table, the more likely the discussion will focus on your organizational agenda. But the advantages of a reactive posture are clear. It is generally easier to “read” your adversary if they lay out their cards first. And allowing the other side to “chair” the session helps to develop their ownership in the process, which may lead to a stronger investment in a settlement. It is always a mistaken notion to assume that “personalities” should determine whether or not your organizational posture is active or reactive.

*Extreme versus Moderate Demands:* Extreme demands build credibility with the membership and constituency, and allow adequate room for compromise, but there often is a risk of polarizing the talks too early, as well as alienating third parties. Moderate demands may produce early conciliation from the other side, but often can leave inadequate room to bargain down.

*Soft versus Hard Styles:* Negotiations involve an attempt to settle on principles and on issues, but it is individuals that must reach agreement face-to-face. Therefore, whether a friendly or abusive style is most effective depends on the total makeup of the bargainers, not just one team. The general rule is that the team with the most flexibility and talent either to initiate or to react with the widest range of styles will hold a clear advantage. Any team is handicapped by individuals who tend to bargain with a style based on personal need or self-satisfaction.

*Fast or Slow Timelines:* Each side has an initial sense as to whether a predetermined or a protracted process best serves its overall needs. During
bargaining, these needs can change. Often the deciding factor for a community organization is its ability to hold the membership together over a particular timeframe, with or without other organizational activity besides bargaining.

**One-sided versus Two-sided Arguments:** In theory, the other side makes concessions because they begin to understand the logic of your demands, either in terms of what is fair from your organization’s perspective, or based on what can benefit them and their self-interest. Generally, any attempt to justify your proposals from your opponent’s point of view only is efficient when there are other “audiences” to be considered—the people who stand behind the opposing bargaining team, third parties, the media, the general public, and so on. Two-sided arguments may sway these audiences, putting additional pressure on the opposing negotiating team. And don’t forget that two-sided arguments will be utilized by the opposition in an attempt to speak behind and over you to your membership and constituency.

**Predictable versus Irrational Behavior:** Negotiations usually are assumed to require rational discourse, and since they follow, rather than proceed, direct confrontation, the benefits to a rational approach are obvious. On the other hand, you can stymie the other side’s countermoves by doing what is unpredictable, acting outside of the immediate experience of their business, government, or bureaucratic milieu.

**Implicit Action versus Explicit Action:** If the bargaining requires additional pressure at certain points, what are the advantages of threatening action, rather than simply instituting action without warning? Threats often are without consequence if they can’t be followed through, yet action without warning can break the trust established at the table.

**Revealing versus Concealing Your Bottom Line:** The course that the respective parties take regarding their bottom lines largely will determine whether one side or the other gets locked in early to a position from which it cannot easily retreat. Generally, it is advisable to avoid getting publicly locked into a position, unless it is unavoidable to maintain credibility with the membership or the constituency.

**Off the Record versus on the Record:** On occasion, informal conversation can break an impasse. Seeking out third parties to serve as temporary mediators, or even organizing neutral parties to define a beneficial compromise, can swing things your way.

**Getting Out or Getting Over:** There is always a question of what price to pay in order to avoid impasse. Both sides have a different need for settlement, depending on the terms of the deal. The bargaining committee only will be able to deliberate on this question if there is a clear organizational consensus on the best alternative to a negotiated agreement. This alone can instruct the committee as to when to abandon the talks.
Protecting versus Eliminating the Opposing Team: If impasse is imminent, there is the option of discrediting the individuals at the table, in hopes of replacing them with more favorable representatives. This is a risky proposition, given the fact that whatever has been accomplished may be jeopardized by eliminating these players.

Organizer’s Role—Primary versus Secondary: As in any organizational activity, the organizer functions as a facilitator but not a formal leader. Negotiations can complicate the distinction, because the organizer performs key roles in three settings. First, the organizer attends the bargaining session and plays some role, even if only as the one who takes notes. Second, the organizer advises, instructs, and sometimes helps to mediate differences among members of the bargaining committee. Third, the organizer works directly with the membership and other nonbargaining committee leaders to ensure that the negotiations build the campaign and the organization. As the group prepares for negotiations, the organizer’s role should be fully discussed and clarified. Retaining a secondary role must be balanced with helping the committee negotiate a victory.

A FINAL WARNING: RESIST INSTITUTIONALIZED BARGAINING

Much of what already has been said might suggest that community organizations would do well to institutionalize the bargaining process with various government or corporate bureaucracies. Nothing could be further from the truth. Organizers must operate with the assumption that negotiations only have one possible benefit: resolving specific conflict by using specific concessions from those decision-makers that have the ability to grant concessions. An organization’s ability to mobilize and move a constituency into action is seriously jeopardized when it maintains a permanent and institutionalized responsibility to bargain over some vague defined mutual area of concern. Moreover, the recent drift among some community organizations to compare bone fide negotiations with “dispute settlement,” “community arbitration,” or “negotiating on the merits” is confusion at best and a sham at worst. Nonetheless, community organizers err, and community organizations suffer, in underestimating the leadership development potential available when the opportunity arises to use bone fide negotiations as a winning campaign tactic. When properly executed, the negotiating process helps leaders to think strategically and builds their overall ownership of the campaign.
GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS
AND VOTING: HOW TO DO VOTER
REGISTRATION, EDUCATION, AND
MOBILIZATION FOR 501c3 ORGANIZATIONS
AND RELATED NONPROFITS

George Pillsbury

Half of eligible Americans do not or cannot vote on Election Day. Turnout is lowest in cities. Since the 1960s, the greatest downturn in voter turnout has been among voters in low- and moderate-income urban neighborhoods where grassroots community organizations often are doing excellent work. Not surprisingly, as the clout of these communities has declined, public policy has shifted on a parallel track. State and federal priorities have changed to tax relief and deregulation for the wealthy donors who finance elections, as campaign promises are filled for the dwindling pool of voters who do vote.

Today, the message is clear. If there is any hope to revitalize low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, cities must reverse the downward and self-perpetuating spiral of nonvoting by bringing a new generation of voters and candidates to the table. Who will make this happen by mobilizing and empowering voters to go to the polls to remake outdated election rules? Grassroots community organizations have the potential to be the voter participation force of the future. As much as any other institution in society, they have the neighborhood’s trust—a huge factor in voter education and voter participation.

GCOS: ANCHORING THE FUTURE OF VOTER ENGAGEMENT—A POTENTIAL UNTAPPED

In the last thirty years, community-based organizations have emerged as important actors in most cities and communities. While GCOs have taken on many issues, they often have been uncertain and ambivalent about whether and how to build power through participation in voting and elections. One reason may be that many GCOs have their roots in past decades when they enjoyed government support. They could accomplish their mission even as voter turnout in their communities was on the decline. Another very practical reason why nonprofits haven’t prioritized voter engagement as
a regular practice is the basic fact that they have very important missions and already are overstretched. Time and resources always are in short supply.

Staff and boards also have had major questions about what the law allows GCOs to do. The fact is that the law does permit nonprofits to engage in a range of electoral activities, including registering voters, carrying out voter education, and encouraging voting—as long as the primary focus is promoting civic participation, education, and nonpartisan voter mobilization.

GCOs on the Move

Today, GCOs have started incorporating voting into their program work for several reasons:

1. Leaders and organizers are making the connection between their ongoing ability to deliver victories for their constituents and the powerlessness of nonvoting.
2. Declining state, federal, and local budgets have driven home the connection. Not only is the future of their community at stake, but also the very funding that allows nonprofits to function is being lost yearly to a steady stream of public policy shifts toward campaign donors and voters who in 2004 are higher income, better educated, and more likely to live in suburbs or urban enclaves of wealth.
3. Foundations supporting community-based urban nonprofits have started to notice the problem as well. They are more willing to fund voter participation now, because their grantees won’t succeed without it.
4. Finally, GCOs have grown more savvy about city and state politics. If they want a call returned, the elected official is much more responsive when their community is voting and the nonprofit is part of making that happen.

The motivation is there. The questions staff and boards usually ask relate to alternatives and options for operating within the fairly broad scope of 501c3 guidelines.

Staying Nonpartisan, Being Effective, and Building Power

A guide to what 501c3 community organizations can and cannot do in voter education and elections

Introduction

It is a common misconception among 501c3 organizations that they are legally prohibited from participating in electoral activities. Federal law bars 501c3s from endorsing or campaigning for candidates. However, outside of
directly partisan activity, C3s may undertake a wide variety of voter education and participation activities. Nonprofits can do a wide range of non-partisan activities, such as candidate forums, voter education, registering voters, and helping to “get-out-the-vote.” GCOs can provide important research and education around their issues. And they are free to directly support or oppose ballot questions within their normal limits on lobbying activity.

Before giving examples of the many election activities nonprofits can undertake, let’s first understand what partisan activities they cannot do. Prohibited activities are listed below.

**A nonprofit 501c3 organization may not:**

1. **Endorse a candidate or party.**
   
   Your nonprofit never should be listed on candidate materials as a supporter. Sometimes overeager candidates list nonprofits on a campaign brochure. If they do this without your permission, you are not at fault. Just ask them to remove your name from the list.

   **Question:** Can a staff or board member endorse a candidate?
   
   **Answer:** Yes, so long as the organization is not listed at all, even including “for identification purposes only.” This is a personal choice of these individuals.

2. **Provide resources to a candidate running for election.**
   
   Nonprofits cannot make “in-kind donations” such as office space or materials. However, a GCO may let a candidate set up a phone bank or use a mailing list, so long as (1) the organization would allow any candidate to use their phones or list and, (2) the nonprofit charges fair market value for the list or phone calls. Understandably, many GCOs do not provide resources to candidates, just to avoid even the appearance of partisanship. However, **when following these guidelines it is legal.**

3. **Publish or distribute materials clearly aimed to influence the outcome of an election.**
   
   Nonprofits can do many kinds of voter education, as we will explore below. However, they are prohibited from doing a mailing and disseminating anything that obviously is intended to bias voters against or for a candidate. Issue materials are fine, but they must be as unbiased as possible and viewed by an ordinary observer as a fair effort to inform voters on issues relevant to the mission of the organization.

   **Question:** How will I know if our voter education is nonpartisan?
   
   **Answer:** There is no bright line. What you generally want to stay away from is taking a single issue and lambasting a candidate’s position to an audience you are aware will be swayed by this message. These aggressive issue campaigns are best done by 501c4s, Political Action
Committees (PACs), and other more political entities. Nonpartisan voter education always is best when the information is coming from a coalition of groups and when questions are asked about a range of issues or concerns.

That’s it. These are the main prohibitions for 501c3s. Now, let’s review the variety of activities nonprofits can do and, hopefully, will do to build a stronger civil society.

**A nonprofit 501c3 organization may do the following:**

1. **Engage in voter registration.**
   Voter registration probably is the most common current activity for GCOs. Every nonprofit can register its members, clients, constituencies, and even board and staff. Yet, the reality today is that most nonvoters are registered. The biggest problem is not registration, but creating and mobilizing voters. The challenge today is encouraging voter participation, doing voter education, and ultimately stimulating citizens to choose to vote, because they understand their stake in elections and/or view voting as the right of a concerned citizen.

   Federal law does bar the use of federal funds for voter registration. This means that an organization that receives 80 percent of its money from the federal government still can register voters. They can account for this with the other money they receive. The majority of nonprofits receive more than half their money from local, state, and private sources and are free to do what they want within normal 501c3 guidelines.

   **Register your members. Your neighborhood. Your board and staff!**
   Your staff and volunteers can register voters, as long as they do not tell them which party to join. However, you can inform the voter about the difference between joining a party and registering as an independent, unenrolled, or otherwise nonaligned voter. Each state has its own rules on whether independents may vote in party primaries. Just be aware that more and more people today either already are registered or are noncitizens and therefore not eligible to register. Therefore, it is always best to combine registration with other outreach activities. The biggest challenge for nonprofits today is to help mobilize the vote.

2. **Conduct voter education.**
   - Do public education and training about participation in the political process.
• Incorporate voting into an adult education class. Set up a voting machine in your lobby so people can practice voting. Provide your community with basic information about upcoming elections.

• Sponsor or cosponsor a candidate forum. Your organization may wish to join with others to sponsor a nonpartisan candidate forum. It is nonpartisan if all candidates for an office are invited. They don’t all have to show up but the more who do attend, the better forum you will have. Keep the questions fair. (This doesn’t mean they can’t be controversial.)

• Publish an issue scorecard on the voting record of legislators. Legislative scorecards are most useful and non-partisan when done with a broader coalition within your field. Scorecards are OK so long as you fairly and accurately reflect the positions and actions of all major candidates.

3. **Offer selected resources to candidates.**

   While most assistance to candidates or parties is prohibited, a nonprofit may:

   • Educate the candidates on your issue. Candidates can benefit from your knowledge about your own issues, your research, and your community. Send them a policy paper. Let them know about a new initiative. Ask them questions.

   • Rent your mailing list or your facility. For example, you may provide meeting space for interested candidates. To do so, you must charge a fair market value—the cost of the space, phone calls, and use of the copying machine—and make the same resources available to any candidate who may happen to request them.

   • Train candidates and campaign managers. A 501c3 organization may collaborate with other nonprofits to provide training for new candidates and campaign staff. The trainings must be publicly advertised and open to all individuals with a genuine interest in the subject matter.

4. **Work to increase voter participation—Get Out The Vote.**

   Make sure that your membership and the broader community know about the next election. Use every opportunity to encourage them to vote. Give them reasons to vote. Or help them find out where and how to vote. Many people don’t vote for lack of knowledge about the process. Most nonprofits don’t have the resources or time to do a classic “get out the vote” (GOTV) campaign. And campaign methods also may be inappropriate if they seem too partisan or treat their audience as if they need to be dragged to the polls.

   There are many ways to encourage or facilitate voting:
• Remind people of election dates. Give them a place to call or a website to find their polling location, or the phone number of a nonprofit that offers rides to the polls.

• Voter education, like that described above, is very helpful. Make sure all your members are aware of the choices they will have on the ballot—highlighting major contested races and ballot questions.

• Do GOTV in a targeted area with your members. GCOs with the time and resources, such as volunteers or paid staff, may want to knock on doors, make phone calls, send e-mails, pass leaflets, put up posters, or mail postcards reminding people to vote.

There are four stages of nonpartisan “Mobilize the Vote” efforts:

1. **Voter Registration** before the deadline.

2. **Personal Contact** with potential voters. Using voter or member lists, knock on doors and make calls. Talk with people in busy areas where large concentrations of eligible voters can be found. Asking voters to sign a “Pledge to Vote” card while providing them with information on the upcoming election is a common tactic.

3. **Voter Education** activities before the election. Depending on the timeframe, some GCOs make an additional set of contacts with potential voters—especially those who signed a “Pledge to Vote” form. These contacts may consist of voter education or an invitation to a candidate forum.

4. **Getting Out the Vote** for Election Day. Some nonprofits may call or knock on the doors of those who pledged to vote as a reminder. Be careful here. Be respectful. Assume that the person you are contacting was planning to vote. Your call is just to ask a question like “Do you or does someone in your household need a ride?” or “Do you have any last-minute questions about where you’re voting or about your rights as a voter?”

5. **On Election Day, free up staff to engage in electoral activities.**

   • Make sure your full-time staff has time off to vote.
   
   • Let your staff take a half-day to volunteer at the polls. Encourage their political participation as a voter and volunteer.
   
   • Encourage your staff to take a day off to work as a poll worker.

   All these activities are nonpartisan and contribute to a working democracy. Whatever you do, celebrate and publicize this day as Election Day, not just another Tuesday workday.

6. **Conduct ballot question education and advocacy.**

   There are completely different rules for ballot questions. Work on ballot questions is considered a lobbying activity, not electioneering. This means that lobbying rules apply—not prohibitions against partisan work for
candidates. A 501c3 organization may endorse and do education on ballot questions up to its normal lobbying limits. A 501c3s can advocate a “yes” or “no” vote or just provide general voter education. GCOS may wish to take sides on ballot questions if their board agrees that the question has a significant impact on the group’s mission and constituencies.

**Question:** What are the 501c3 lobbying limits?

**Answer:** IRS regulations allow 501c3 organizations to spend an “insubstantial” amount of money on lobbying. Depending on the budget of the 501c3, this still can be a significant investment. “Insubstantial” roughly is measured as a percentage of a 501c3’s annual expenditures. It has no bright line. As a general rule, 501c3 nonprofits should not spend much more than 5–10 percent of their budgets lobbying on pending legislation. This gives organizations with larger budgets significant leeway to spend some resources on lobbying. *(For more information on this subject, a good place to start is the website and publications of the Washington-based Alliance for Justice.)*

**Question:** Can a 501c3 expand its lobbying ability?

**Answer:** One easy way is electing to file a one-page form with the IRS, Form 501h. This is highly recommended for nonprofits with any interest in political affairs. There is no reason for a GCO not to file such a form. It raises your lobbying expenditure limit to 20 percent. Boards like it because the line is clear. The 501c3 organization only is required to report lobbying expenditures on its annual 990.

**Question:** How does a 501c3 keep track of its lobbying expenditures?

**Answer:** One of the greatest myths is that this requires a huge investment in tracking. A 501c3 is not expected to detail and track every so-called lobbying expenditure down to the most minute detail. The IRS does expect nonprofits to track significant expenditures, such as a mailing or staff hours spent on a particular lobbying campaign. There are a range of methods that can be used to do this tracking. A common approach is to set a formula or a weekly or monthly estimate to allocate hours for lobbying purposes. *(This also will be necessary if performed for a separate 501c4 organization.)*

### A Quick Review for 501c3 Organizations:

#### Common Concerns

Today’s reality is that most nonprofits operate well within the guidelines of their tax-exempt status. Nonetheless, board members still may have concerns about working within 501c3 limits. Most voter or political activity can be fully nonpartisan:
• Registering your community to vote
• Informing people of when and where to vote
• Getting out the vote
• Providing your community with voter education prepared by you or coming from a nonpartisan organization or media outlet

The most common concern of GCOs entails the distribution of literature about the candidate’s positions on their issue. If the materials were created by a broad-based nonpartisan organization, such as a citywide nonprofit coalition, it is okay. If your GCO produces its own materials on the candidates, make sure that everything printed does relate directly to its mission or issues. The literature must pass the test of being fair, being accurate, and having a reasonable appearance of nonpartisanship. It cannot be primarily intended to influence a vote for or against a particular candidate. This kind of issue advocacy is acceptable only by the 501c4s, Unincorporated Associations, or PACs discussed below.

When it comes to candidate literature produced by your own organization, you have to be your own judge. Is the literature fair and accurate? Is its distribution timed in such a way as to appear intended to influence a vote? If questions remain in this area, consult the publications listed in the bibliography or a knowledgeable nonprofit advocate in your area.

If you wish to have your members support and endorse candidates, consider the three following options:

**501c4 nonprofit Organization**: Most common for larger organizations and coalitions who do both lobbying and candidate work.

**Unincorporated Association**: A good vehicle for smaller nonprofits and neighborhood organizations allowing members to work on a voluntary basis directly for the election or defeat of candidates.

**Political Action Committees**: Useful for organizations or coalitions that are very active in politics and want to broadly influence the political process with their endorsements.

**USING A PARTNER 501C4 LOBBYING ORGANIZATION**

Increasingly, 501c3s that do a significant amount of lobbying or electoral advocacy establish a partner 501c4 organization. This is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization set up for the purposes of lobbying on public issues and endorsing candidates to members. The big difference, or course, is that while a 501c4 is exempt from federal income taxes and other taxes,
donors to a 501c4 organization may not take a tax deduction for their donation. A 501c4 is a lobbying organization—not a charitable organization. As the chart below shows, they are free to engage in more political activities, including unlimited lobbying and partisan communication about candidates and elections to their members.

The most common reasons for establishing a 501c4 organization are to

- Expand lobbying activities.
- Endorse and/or support candidates among your broadly defined members. A member may be any person within your geographic reach who signs a petition, attends your events, pays dues, or otherwise voluntarily has connected with your organization and receives regular communications from it.
- In some states, 501c4s allow you to spend more money to influence campaigns directly than you can as either an individual or a PAC.

What are the downsides or questions?

1. It’s another bank account and set of state and federal reports. The reports essentially are the same as those required for a 501c3.
2. It may draw more attention to your increased political activities from the public or IRS. Generally, this hasn’t been a problem for 501c3 organizations working with a partner 501c4 organization. There are many examples locally and nationally of this structural arrangement.
3. Some organizations end up setting up two different active boards. This is a big mistake and even can split your effort if the boards are not getting along. It is better to have one lead board that deals with the executive director, staffing, and overall program goals. If you choose to establish two very separate boards, then you must understand that this will require two executive directors and a greater degree of separation. This is a viable model if the 501c3 and 501c4 can find ways to establish meaningful partnerships and trust in the context of their mutual goals.

UNINCORPORATED ASSOCIATIONS

The Unincorporated Association is a good starting point for a GCO to expand politically, and it can act much like a 501c4. Most state and federal laws treat Unincorporated Associations like a partnership or as individuals. These types of associations are common for volunteer groups involved in many community activities. All that is really required is setting up a bank account to make voluntary transactions. The account is
established at a local bank. Generally, all that is needed is a tax number supplied by the IRS (obtained by filing a simple SSN form) and a few members willing to serve as “officers” and account signers. Unincorporated Associations are used when you are not raising a lot of money—say, in the $2,000–15,000 range. It is a far easier way to go before you establish a more formal nonprofit, 501c4 organization.

These Unincorporated Associations with a bank account may

- Have no lobbying limit.
- Interview and endorse candidates for their members.
- Make in-kind and monetary contributions to a candidate up to the limits of state and federal law that apply to individuals.

An Unincorporated Association may not

- Offer a tax deduction to contributors.
- Define its membership similar to a 501c4 for campaign purposes.

**POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEES (PACS): A WAY TO MAKE CANDIDATE ENDORSEMENTS**

You all have heard of PACs, or political action committees. You may not know that members of your GCO can establish a PAC. The primary reason for doing so is to endorse candidates. A PAC is the only entity, outside of individuals and party committees, that is allowed to announce its endorsement to the general public. Unlike 501c4 endorsements, which are for a C4’s members only, a PAC endorsement may be

1. Printed on the campaign literature of the candidate.
2. Included by nonpartisan voter education organizations.
3. Announced to and reported on by the media.

PACs may make limited in-kind or monetary contributions to candidates. Similarly, contributions to PACs are regulated by state and federal laws, depending on the jurisdiction in which the PAC is established. To form a PAC to endorse local or state candidates, contact your state office of campaign finance to obtain the relevant forms and rules.

Consider these guidelines if you want to establish a PAC:

- Know the contribution and finance limits. Learn the rules for in-kind expenditures.
- Appoint a good treasurer (very important!) who will file the PAC reports on time.
• Have the capacity for a fair and reasonable endorsement process.
• Consider the limited time of candidates you want to encourage to run for office. Yes, we want accountability, but keep your questionnaire brief.
• Be prepared for feedback from some candidates whom you do not endorse.
• Publicize your endorsements to the media and voter education organizations.

Permissible Voter and Election Activities 501c3 Nonprofit Organizations*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What All 501(c)(3) Organizations Can Do on a Nonpartisan Basis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Voter Registration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voter Education on the Candidates and the Issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voter Education on the Process of Voting (where to vote, information on elections and the election process)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate Forums</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coalition-Sponsored, Multi-Issue Voter Guides about the Candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Out the Vote—Encourage and Facilitate Voting in your community and among your members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting and opposing ballot questions</td>
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</tbody>
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*Federally funded organizations that receive most of their money—85–90 percent or more—from the federal government are subject to different rules and limits.

Permissible Lobbying and Electoral Activities for 501c4 Nonprofit Organizations, Unincorporated Associations, and PACs (Political Action Committees)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What 501c4s, Associations, and PACs Can Do</th>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate endorsements to members</td>
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<td>In-kind contributions to candidates (within state and federal limits)</td>
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<td>Issue-oriented voter registration intended to influence the outcome of an election</td>
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<tr>
<td>Targeted distribution of voting records</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unlimited lobbying</td>
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<td>Unlimited contributions to ballot questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contributions to candidates subject to federal and state limits and disclosure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Announce candidate endorsements to the general public and the media</td>
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*Note:* This table provides an idea of activities a 501c3 nonprofit should avoid.

**PUBLICATIONS**

For more information, we recommend the following publications from the Alliance for Justice in Washington, D.C.


Schrader, B. Holly. (1998). *The Connection: Strategies for Creating and Operating 501(c)3s, 501(c)(4)s, and PACs.*

*To order any of these publications, contact:*

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[www.afj.org](http://www.afj.org)
Who is MassVote?

The Massachusetts Voter Education Network (MassVote) is a non-partisan statewide voting rights and voter education organization dedicated to increasing voter participation in Massachusetts. It seeks to reverse decades of low voter participation, especially among urban communities. We are a statewide network working together to promote election reform based on four principles basic to American democracy:

- Allow all eligible voters to freely exercise their right to vote in a process open and understandable to all.
- Ensure voters are treated with respect and dignity at the polls.
- Guarantee free and fair elections on a level playing field where all votes count the same.
- Encourage the full participation and active participation of all voters in local, state and federal elections.

The Mass Voter Education Network shares resources and information on voting rights, voter education, and voter participation election issues with organizations concerned about voting and voter participation across the state.

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Economic justice issues are often at the core of community organizing efforts, and having effective, committed allies is critical to successful struggles. In numerous cities across the United States, community-labor coalitions have been able to develop winning alliances over issues such as Living Wage initiatives, urban economic development benefits, and legislative or electoral campaigns. They develop because sometimes there are issues that no one group can win on its own, as in the arena of health care reform or immigrant rights. At other times, there are strikes or union organizing drives that need support from the community. Large corporations and institutions may be indifferent to the needs of the local community. These problems affect people, both in the workplace and in their communities, and combining the forces that can bring change in each setting makes a lot of sense.

For example, large urban development projects can be very disruptive for local neighborhoods: there is displacement and gentrification, and local residents may not get any job opportunities in the completed projects. These possibilities were what concerned local groups in Los Angeles when a sports and entertainment district was about to be developed in the area around the Staples Center. Through careful coalition building and intense outreach and organizing, the community and labor organizations were able to secure an agreement from the developers of the project in several areas: recreation funds, a goal that 70 percent of the jobs created would pay Living Wages, a first-source hiring program for low-income individuals displaced by the project, a commitment for affordable housing, and more. The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, a hugely successful community-labor coalition, was one of the lead organizations in the effort, and more than thirty different groups were involved.

In over 100 cities, coalitions have organized for and won Living Wage ordinances—that is, the enactment of local ordinances that set wage standards for companies doing business with municipalities or development authorities. These ordinances tend to affect the companies that local governments contract with for such services as sanitation, janitorial work, or food service, but they can extend to other activities as well. Generally an array of unions, community organizations, faith-based groups, and others coalesce to help elevate the living standards of low-wage service workers.
These are the workers who also are local residents in housing developments and tenements, whose children populate urban schools, and who often must rely on various forms of assistance for the working poor to get by.

Building and maintaining community-labor coalitions are by no means easy undertakings. It is often difficult for community groups to grasp how labor unions function, and unions may not have a deep understanding of what local community organizations actually do. The structures of both kinds of organizations are quite different, the organizational processes vary, and the legal, financial, and regulatory environments each type of organization confronts are distinct. Yet community organizations and labor unions both are concerned with empowering their members and constituents to better their lives. There is much to gain from developing relationships, building trust levels, and marshalling forces to pursue common goals. So what kinds of things do community organizers and grassroots leaders need to know about unions and the labor movement to build these coalitions, and how might they go about it?

HOW LABOR IS STRUCTURED

There is a lot that needs to be considered but, briefly, one key thing is that the labor movement is not monolithic. There is huge variation among unions and so it is difficult to offer generalizations about them or the labor movement. However, many unions are very open to working with community allies, and some have long histories of allying with local community organizations, faith-based organizations, and the civil rights and other social movements. It is important to understand a little about the structures in the labor movement. First, the basic unit of a union is a local that has members from one or more worksites. Some locals may consist of workers at one large worksite, and others are amalgamated locals that represent workers from several different (usually) smaller worksites. Union locals usually are part of a larger national organization, an international union that consists of all the locals in the country and sometimes extends into Canada or Puerto Rico. Many unions have regional bodies that have various names (councils, districts, regions, and so on) and that help coordinate efforts in their jurisdictions. For most union locals, elected leaders become full-time functionaries of their union and represent the union in numerous settings and situations, from contract negotiations to grievances, community events, and much more. Especially in recent years, a more activist spirit has surfaced in labor. Many unions are trying to mobilize their membership—the rank-and-file—to be more active in carrying out programs and more involved in union affairs.

The umbrella of the labor movement is the AFL-CIO, the American Federation of Labor—Congress of Industrial Organizations. This is, in effect,
a coalition or federation of unions, and most (but not all) unions are affiliated with it. It operates on the national, state, and local levels. International unions affiliate at the national level, and locals and regional units may affiliate at the state and local levels. *State federations* work on the statewide level, and their membership consists of unions in the respective states. *Central labor councils* operate in cities and metropolitan areas and, again, are composed of unions in these localized settings. Many central labor councils are involved in the AFL-CIO’s *Union Cities* Program, in which unions intensity their efforts to mobilize and involve members in local issues, political campaigns, and solidarity efforts.

Since 1995, with a change in the national leadership of the AFL-CIO and the election of John Sweeney as President, Linda Chavez-Thompson as Executive Vice President, and Richard Trumka as Secretary Treasurer, the AFL-CIO has become increasingly proactive, emphasizing the forming of partnerships with community groups and involving the labor movement in broader social movements. The AFL-CIO is urging affiliates to devote more resources to organizing the unorganized, involving members in community and political issues, as well as working to have organized labor play a greater role in key issues, such as health care access, immigrant rights, and other social concerns.

There also are different *constituency groups* affiliated with the AFL-CIO, including the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, and Pride At Work, that operate at national, state, or local levels in some locations. These organizations may be interested in participating in community-labor coalitions. One national network with significant participation by labor, *Jobs with Justice*, works on issues of economic rights and has local coalitions in over forty cities. A student-based organization, the *United Students Against Sweatshops*, focuses on issues of workers rights, sweatshops, and campus-based living wage campaigns. In some areas, *college-and university-affiliated labor education programs* or *labor studies programs* also are involved in labor and community activities.

When community-labor coalitions form, the labor participants may be union locals, regional bodies, central labor councils or, in some cases, state federations or local chapters of the various constituency groups. However, when community organizers are trying to build coalitions, they should understand which unions represent which workers and who might be interested in the issues that will be worked on. In living wage campaigns, for example, unions that organize in service sectors and central labor councils also tend to be interested and active in coalitions. There often is a stereotype that union members are older white men who try to keep women and people of color out of their ranks. Community organizers need to know that only a minority of unions have control over who gets into jobs, mainly
in the skilled crafts and trades, and that these unions are under pressure to open their ranks and are making some progress in doing so. Moreover, the majority of unions do not control who gets hired and represent all the workers in the units and workplaces where they are recognized as the collective bargaining agent.

Finally, unions may need help in organizing workers to win the right to have a union, to win the right to have a contract, or to win a strike. In all of these activities, a variety of tactics familiar to community organizing are used: demonstrations, pickets, boycotts, sit-ins, lobbying, leafleting, letter writing, and political organizing. These are the situations that often bring about requests for assistance from unions.

**TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY-LABOR COALITIONS**

The complexities of how the labor movement is structured are detailed above so that community organizers can see that there are many avenues through which to approach labor in order to work on important issues. One of the most important parts of the process is the same thing that all good organizing is based on—the building of relationships and the deepening of trust over time. So here are several areas to consider that have arisen in some of the work that has transpired in various locales over recent decades.

Although there are some commonalities, the organizing models, strategies, and tactics are different in the respective arenas of community and labor. Community organizations often design campaigns around local “turf” issues that allow for specific limited victories as building blocks for larger issues. Labor often doesn’t have a choice in taking on an issue—there are contracts that must be negotiated, workplaces to organize (always a risk), and political or legislative battles that are important but are not certain victories. Another critically important variable is that labor unions and labor organizing have much more legal regulation than community organizations. Unions try to circumvent cumbersome labor law when they can, but nevertheless they are held to strict reporting requirements. The organizing process itself is often held up when obstinate employers use legal maneuvers to derail a campaign. There is very little parallel in community organizing.

Unions and community groups tend to use very different meeting styles and decision-making processes. Unions most often use the formalities of Robert’s Rules in meetings, where as community groups may use more informal styles of running meetings. The leadership and staff roles also are different in labor and community groups. The full-time staff of community organizations may not be empowered to take positions on behalf of the organization without first checking back with the
volunteer citizen leaders. The full-time representatives of unions tend to be elected officers, who are expected to carry on union business and may not have to check back with membership in the same way. So when meetings are planned to initiate community-labor coalitions, these things need to be kept in mind.

It is generally advisable for some informal discussions to take place between a smaller group of individuals from labor and community organizations before any coalition-building efforts are put in motion. This helps to make sure there is a solid foundation on which to proceed. All the parties should be comfortable that they will benefit from going ahead and that each stakeholder’s agenda or issues will be respected. It may even be advisable to do some mutual education on the mission and agenda of participating organizations. Community organizations often think that unions have unlimited resources and have plenty of staff to deploy to various meetings and task groups. In actuality, unions must meet many simultaneous demands to empower their membership and pursue their mission, and ultimately are accountable to their dues-paying members. Conversely, unions may not be up to date on the issues in local communities and understand how grassroots leaders and organizers set priorities and develop issue campaigns. However, with patience and careful attention to issues of inclusion, these potential obstacles can be surmounted.

It may be helpful to rotate the location and chairs for meetings, just to ensure a feeling of parity and fairness. By doing this, more participants get to buy into the coalitions, and people can see just where and how the respective coalition partners operate.

WHEN MIGHT COMMUNITY-LABOR COALITIONS BE USEFUL?

There is no one checklist of when community-labor coalitions might be beneficial; however, mutual interests of community and labor organizations generally involve economic justice issues. These could include all the myriad of problems that confront low-wage workers, including wage levels, childcare issues, training programs, welfare policy, and more. Some of the specific issues from this list may include raising the minimum wage in a state, enacting a Living Wage ordinance, and setting up good job-training programs that focus on worker needs—as opposed to business needs, opening up opportunities for workers to get further training and educational opportunities, extending the length during which workers qualify for unemployment benefits, and more.

The entire arena of local development projects is another opportunity
for coalitions, which can raise issues about “community impacts” and who should share in the benefits of development. While at times it would seem that these kinds of projects may be divisive for labor and community forces, it is precisely that potential division that compels both groups to try to work together. Both parties can find ways to agree on local hiring preferences and training unemployed community residents. Enacting and enforcing corporate accountability standards for firms that get tax breaks for development and job creation is a related area that community-labor coalitions have worked on in many states. Additionally, plant closings still plague many U.S. cities—another economic development challenge that local coalitions can address.

In some cases, there may be political or legislative campaigns that can be worked on jointly. There are many health care reform coalitions across the United States in which labor and community forces participate. In some communities, local candidates slates, referenda, or initiatives are backed by community-labor alliances. In these instances, the legal constraints on political action have to be taken into account, but there is wide latitude for legislative issue work.

Finally, immigrants’ rights issues are ripe for joint action. In 2003, labor and community forces joined in working on the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride, a national effort to raise public awareness about the rights of immigrant workers and their families. In many communities, immigrant worker centers are developing to address the complex problems plaguing immigrants, both documented and undocumented. Certainly, there’s no shortage of issues that both community and labor organizations can tackle.

**IN CONCLUSION**

One of the most exciting coalitions in the Northeast, the Connecticut Center for a New Economy (CCNE), whose work in New Haven has produced a deep level of community-labor solidarity, characterizes its works as framing a “new social contract” in New Haven and the state. Specifically, this involves their work on the role of a major academic institution in the city, as an employer and as an actor in the larger community. Their work has evolved over a number of years, focusing on serious worker and community struggles in New Haven. Taking their work as a vision of what can be accomplished, community-labor coalitions have the potential to truly redefine the local political and social agenda. Just like all community organizing projects, it takes patience, building relationships, and developing trust over time, but it is worth all the effort when we can make meaningful change.
FOR FURTHER READING ON COMMUNITY-LABOR COALITIONS

An earlier anthology:

A recent anthology:

The following periodicals also have articles, on occasion, on community-labor partnerships:

*Labor Studies Journal*
*New Labor Forum*
*Working USA*
COALITIONS AND OTHER RELATIONS

Tim Sampson

This book is about building an organizational base of power. Whenever people think about organizing to build power in order to win on issues, the idea of coalitions with existing organizations comes up. Sometimes this seems to be a shortcut—just link up the organizations that already exist to form a coalition, and there will be instant power to win victories. Sometimes that may be true and possible. But often it’s a mirage, an illusion, a dangerous distraction from the power-building organizing job that has to be done first.

This is so because of two important limitations of existing organizations: first, many of these organizations are not themselves powerful. There are exceptions, but when we look around in low- and moderate-income communities, we do not typically see many strong organizations. Second, even where there are organizations with low- and moderate-income constituencies with some strength—churches, unions, and senior groups, for example—their purposes, goals, style, and programs make it much harder than it looks to engage them in your organization’s issues.

The real-world arithmetic of coalitions has been aptly stated by organizer Mike Miller as “zero plus zero equals zero.” If you don’t have any organized power, you can’t join with another organization to create more power—especially if they are weak too! Another way of thinking about coalitions is as a chain whose strength is measured not by its length, but by its weakest link. So until you have built some people power, your eye and energy should be on the task of building your own organization, rather than on forming coalitions.

But this doesn’t mean your organization shouldn’t cultivate friendly relations with other organizations. You will need support. We are building community as well as power. Division is a key tactic of the opposition. The way to approach these friendly relations is to think through—just as we do in direct membership organizing—the why, when, who, how, and what of these relations.

WHY

There are three main reasons to enter into relations with other organizations:

To Build Your Organization

For example, you can contact a local church in the hope that some of its members in your neighborhood will join your organization.

To “Borrow” Power

Although the old saying, “Never a borrower or a lender be,” sets an admirable standard, in organizing, as in life, there are exceptions to this rule of independence. For example, you may be in a fight on an issue where you need help, or you will lose. We try to stay out of such fights, but our calculations aren’t always perfect. If a deal for help on this fight with another organization seems to be the key to winning, then it’s certainly a try—especially if there’s little time or ability to recruit more people directly into your organization.

To Prevent a Serious Division

For example, if a nominal alliance with a union, which has jurisdiction in the situation that you are addressing, can keep it from being played against you by the management, then effort at such an arrangement is common sense. The Citizens Action League’s contact with utility workers in advance paid off when their union didn’t oppose “Lifeline Rates” legislation.

WHEN

The best times to consider coalitions and other alliances are after you have built your initial base of power and before you get into a major fight when you may need help or need to avoid a division. Talk to the union before your utility campaign, rather than when it’s about to come out against you. Build relations with the churches and senior groups in your neighborhood, so that when you need their support you don’t have to start from scratch.

WHO

Which organizations are the most likely coalition partners for low- and moderate-income people’s organizations? Churches and unions that both have some of “our” people and share many of our values; senior groups; some social service agencies and public interest groups, especially on issues where they have expertise; the League of Women Voters, P.T.A., and similar groups that can lend traditional legitimacy and “fairness” on issues
that are in their area; and other community organizations that may be willing to directly make deals for support on their campaigns are fairly obvious. Teenage gangs, business associations, and conservative political groups might be examples of “strange bedfellow” alliances for a particular issue, time, and place.

There are different kinds of organizations—those with direct membership; those that are already coalitions of organizations; those that are set up as agencies—a group of professional staff people with a policy-making board working on behalf of a particular constituency or “in the public interest”; and compound organizations with chapters, districts, state and national bodies, and so on. Coalition work naturally will differ in relation to these structural factors and differences in style, purposes, and values.

**HOW**

The first step is to gather intelligence about the organization(s) you are going to approach. Next is direct contact, usually a personal visit. If it’s possible to attend an organization’s meetings and other activities, you can learn a great deal about how they work. People usually enjoy telling how their organization works, its history, and what it is doing. Members of your organization who belong to (or have friends or relatives in) the other organization can be helpful. Exchanging newsletters, flyers, research, and other paper is easy. Asking for advice, contacts, information, and the use of resources, like meeting rooms and office equipment, helps establish contact and commerce. Interestingly enough, if you think about it, people like to do favors for others!

The rest of how to make organizational relations happen depends on what you want. One way to get support from another organization is to invite them to designate a representative to participate on your campaign or action committee. This follows the principle that participation builds ownership and commitment. Other principles of building these relations will be discussed later in this article.

**WHAT**

Here is a range of relations with other organizations following from the simplest informal friendly relation.

**Endorsements**

This entails getting (or giving!) the name of an organization as supporting an issue. The United Farm Workers (UFW) Union Boycott Committees
found that their endorsements had the advantage of being highly valued by other organizations, so they traded UFW endorsements of other groups’ rallies and issues for support on UFW picket lines and other boycott work. The secret here is to get what you want in exchange for the endorsement. Like the UFW, it helps to collect in advance—that is, your endorsement should come after work and participation on your behalf by members of another organization. And understand: most endorsement are not accompanied by any further resources or commitments, unless this is part of the deal in the first place.

**Alliance on an Issue**

Here, two or more organizations agree to work together on a particular issue. Important elements include getting clear on the goals, demands, strategy, tactics, timeline, and roles in the campaign to fight and win on the issue. A campaign platform or set of principles on the issue helps. A joint issue/action committee with the representatives of each organization empowered to decide and act based on these principles is one way to proceed. Such an alliance may be for the full campaign or just for a specific event/action. If the alliance is flexible and each organization is free to act on its own as well as come together for joint activities, then you can have your organizational cake and bake a coalition cake too!

**Ad Hoc Coalition on an Issue**

The next most formal step (up or down, depending on your point of view about coalitions!) from an alliance is a formal coalition on an issue. Formed to fight on a particular issue or set of issues, an ad hoc coalition carries the idea of alliance a step further by creating a new organization—the coalition—that speaks and acts for the member organizations on this issue. For example, the “Coalition against the Third Ward Urban Renewal Plan” might be formed by a wide range of groups. Typically, several organizations take the lead and a number of others endorse and contribute resources and legitimacy. One problem is recognition—your organization can’t get as much visibility in such a coalition as in an alliance or alone. An advantage is that forming such a coalition may permit your organization to move this issue into the coalition and move its main effort on to other fronts.

**Continuing Coalitions**

A successful ad hoc coalition or a series of alliances on issues may result in a decision to combine forces in a permanent structure. Here the coalition—a new organization—becomes the primary power vehicle draw-
ing together the member groups’ own power bases. This clearly is a different kind of organization than its component parts. It is formed to provide the vehicle for action on common interests of the organizations that comprise it, while the constituent groups continue to pursue their separate interests in their customary ways. Sometimes this “organization of organizations” (O of Os) is the format of a distinct organizing effort. Statewide organizations like Illinois Public Action Council (IPAC) or Virginia Action and citywide efforts like the San Francisco Organizing Project (SFOP), which is made up of churches, congregations, unions, and community organizations, would be examples of this kind of organizing. Large neighborhood or district organizations organized by combining churches, community groups, and block clubs also follow this pattern. The Professional Activities Committee for Engineering (PACE) in Providence, Rhode Island, is one of the oldest of these neighborhood coalitions.

**Affiliation**

Another way to form a continuing relationship between organizations is for one group to affiliate with another (usually larger) organization. For example, the Citizens Action League (CAL), a low- and moderate-income economic justice organization in California, chose to affiliate with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). On the basis of an affiliation agreement, CAL became CAL/ACORN, the ACORN affiliate in California. Now it participates in national ACORN campaigns and carries the ACORN banner in California.

**SOME PRINCIPLES**

It is beyond the scope of this short article to detail the mechanics and technology of successful coalition work. However, several key principles can be listed.

The essence of coalition building is clarity about the self-interests of the organizations involved. And, just as in the rest of our organizing work, this means we must be clear about our own self-interests and help others figure out theirs! What we want from this organizational relationship, and how that can relate to a possible self-interest of the organization we are seeking to hook up with, is one way to think this through. One way to approach the same topic is to ask, “What are we willing to deliver in order to make a deal with another organization that we would like to deliver for us?”

Another important principle directly related to self-interest is that people are interested in (and enjoy!) doing things for and with friends and comrades—people they know and have worked with before. If you want
to build organizational ties, it makes sense to set the stage by engaging in friendly contact and commerce with the people involved. Introduce yourself—or get a mutual friend to do it. Speak directly with people about their organizations—and the rest of their lives. Spend time informally with people from organizations you’d like to get related to. Show up at key events where being there is itself a form of organizational support—people appreciate this, and it’s an excellent opportunity for them to begin getting familiar with you. Union picket lines or support rallies, church installations, annual meetings, dinners, actions, and fundraisers all are good places for these kind of beginnings to take place. The flowers of organizational relations grow from the seeds of personal interest, kindness, and cultivation!

Be clear on decision-making. When representatives from organizations meet, are they empowered to decide and act “forward” or do they have to go “back” to their own organizations for approval? Both ways can work, but the timing and process of making coalition decisions need to be clearly understood by each organization involved.

Know the other organization; do not assume their organization is set up and works the same way as yours does. Find out. You need to know their formal and informal decision-making process and who is who in it. Unions, for example, frequently want a formal written request for an endorsement and participation, which can be officially acted upon at an executive board meeting. Churches may handle alliances through informal decision-making led by the pastor.

Build your organization’s reputation as one that DELIVERS! Be clear and specific on what you will do, and then do it! The major strength of our organizations is people. A good way to make that clear to other organizations is to send a visible (signs, buttons, T-shirts, jackets, hats) delegation to support another organization’s event—and then encourage them to reciprocate. As few as three or five visible members can establish your presence and start the coalition spirit growing.

A PARTING SHOT

Division between our groups is a classic problem that holds back the formation of a powerful majority of low- and moderate-income people in the struggle for economic and social justice. UNITY, through coalitions and other organizational relations, is a vital solution. But all the cooperating, coordinating, networking, and coalition building will not organize the unorganized. That can be done only through deciding to begin, continue, and keep on with the power base–building organizing described in this book. As Cesar Chavez told me many years ago, “You have to organize one farm worker today and then get another one tomorrow;
after you have three or four, one will probably drop out; but one day a beautiful thing will happen—one of your members will bring in a new member. If you have only a few members it will still be more than most people ever will organize.” And I would add that the more organizing that happens, the greater the possibility that powerful coalitions can THEN be formed! Organize.
COALITIONS: ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR ORGANIZING

Beth B. Rosenthal and Terry Mizrahi

This article supports coalition building as an important form of organizing for social change. Traditional grassroots and single organizational models of change are insufficient to tackle the challenges facing organizers in today’s complex environment. When change goals involve legislative and policy advocacy, reforming corporate behavior, or producing innovative programs, coalitions often are the most effective strategy.

This article debates the ideas of the late Tim Sampson, who wrote about coalitions in the 1980s (“Debate 1,” 1993; Sampson, 1984). Sampson distrusted coalitions, urged caution, and offered advice to organizers who considered building and using them. Since that time, collaborative approaches have become favored in progressive political organizing, as well as business and nonprofit ventures. Decades of experience now inform work in coalitions, providing today’s practitioners with substantial new resources for their use.

DEFINITIONS

Coalitions are a form of collaboration in which a group of independent organizations voluntarily works together to address complex problems beyond the scope of a single organization. Coalitions are characterized by mutual benefit, interdependence, reciprocity, concerted action, joint production, and dynamic tensions (Rosenthal and Mizrahi, 1994). They address external conditions and targets and attempt to produce tangible outcomes that benefit their members, for example, altering policies and laws or creating new resources.

Coalitions generate a common vision, a jointly developed structure and shared work, resources, and rewards. While addressing common goals for a limited time, member organizations in a coalition retain their own distinct autonomy and identity (Mizrahi and Rosenthal, 1992). Collaborating entails creating a new organizational structure for cooperative action where lines of authority and accountability are more lateral than vertical. In this article, we focus on coalitions and also utilize the term “collaboration” in its generic sense.
A. Increased Coalition Usage

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the paradigm for organizing has shifted from conflict to collaboration, from individual organization expansion and ownership to mergers and strategic partnership, and from fragmented base building to broad-scale multi-organizational efforts that can influence bigger targets. Several factors have contributed to the increase in coalitions:

1. **Growth in the nonprofit sector and shift in focus:** Today’s nonprofit organizations not only deliver services but also get involved in political action to solve problems and give voice to social demands. In the United States there are over a million tax-exempt nonprofit organizations including many public-serving social welfare organizations that do substantial lobbying and policy advocacy. Policy arenas are highly fragmented, target populations are simultaneously served by dozens of programs, and no one agency or committee has sole authority or power. Coalitions provide a way to consolidate expertise, coordinate action, and gain optimal access to multiple points of decision-making.

2. **Organizations are now moving from local to national bases,** and from discrete segregated membership to broader, diverse groupings. Thousands of advocacy organizations such as civil rights groups, public interest groups, and trade and professional associations have established a national presence in order to influence government and the public. Coordination through networks of chapters or local organizations facilitates cross-country as well as cross-issue coalition-building.

3. **The recent emphasis on civil society and revitalizing democracy** has produced thousands of citizens groups, nongovernmental organizations, and civic partnerships. These politically active nonprofits enlarge opportunities for citizen participation in public decisions and prompt government accountability. Such groups frequently operate in coalitions to engage diverse stakeholders and facilitate shared planning and resource allocation. The inclusion of consumer and client representatives has further increased the legitimacy of many such coalitions and provided access for traditionally disenfranchised constituencies.

4. **The role of government** has shifted from being the sole funder or regulator of service to being one of the players, a partner with subcontractors and intermediaries, such as service coordination coalitions. Coalitions are now at the table as legitimate representatives of communities and service providers who are recognized as vital
stakeholders. Organizers can avail themselves of a range of insider approaches in addition to adversarial roles.

5. **Organizations in the twenty-first century function with increased interdependence:** Local issues usually reflect broader social, health, and economic problems, and often are intertwined. Increased complexity and diversity and deeper specialization require connections between diverse organizations and multiple and comprehensive, rather than singular, approaches to problem solving.

6. **Technology** has resolved some of the earlier communication and coordination challenges of operating in coalitions. Web sites, Internet linkages, listservs, and e-mail facilitate information sharing, the cross-fertilization of ideas, and rapid mobilization. Computer-assisted research, access to public data, and mapping provide more systematic and complete information for planning and problem solving. Internet connections also allow for inclusive review and decision-making, easing a more participatory approach consonant with the coalition mode.

**B. Greater Capacity for Collaborative Approaches**

Today’s organizers can benefit from new knowledge, competence, and support for coalitions.

1. **Collaboration skills and leadership:** Increased use of coalitions has produced new skills—dialogue, working with differences, maximizing diversity, negotiation, consensus, and inclusive solutions. Organizations have cultivated intergroup social capital and network resources. New collaborative, lateral, relational leadership styles are gaining prominence, which are more suited for command of coalitions (Crislip and Larson, 1994).

2. **The professionalization of organizing:** Recent decades have brought advances in the professionalization of organizing, including greater expertise on coalitions. University courses and texts on community organizing now cover coalition building and interorganizational relations. Coalition skills also are incorporated in curricula used by intermediary organizations, trade associations, and networks to train their constituencies.

3. **Research and evaluations** of coalition efforts have contributed qualitative and quantitative data on best practices and effective strategies and methods. More systematic knowledge is now available through manuals and technical assistance to guide coalitions through different stages and struggles (e.g., Mattessich and Monsey, 1992).
C. Difficult Conditions

1. Competing and multiple coalitions: Today’s civic landscape features both intense cooperation and fragmentation, with little collaboration among the numerous coalitions. Finding ways to unite and leverage the power of diverse coalition constituencies remains illusive. While groups may work simultaneously with several coalitions, their coalitions are rarely linked or aligned around larger agendas.

2. Conservative climate: Although funding for some collaborative efforts is adequate, grants tend to support those efforts that focus on modest systemic reforms or coordination of services, rather than those that address the redistribution of power and resources. The conservative political climate favors consensual collaborations, compromise, and negotiated solutions. It is more challenging today to organize coalitions working for social and economic justice, especially those linked to social movements.

**COALITION APPLICATIONS**

Coalitions are used both as the **means** to achieve tangible, external goals and as **models** that work across differences to maximize positive interaction and creativity.

**A. Coalitions as Means by Which to Achieve Specific Outcomes**

1. Service integration and strategic partnerships: These coalitions connect diverse services into one system to increase capacity and variety, provide more comprehensive approaches, avoid duplication and fragmentation, or reduce costs. Sometimes mandated by government or private funders, such coalitions are prevalent vehicles for health care, social services, mental health, and education. They allow diverse components of a service structure to focus on their shared domain, link resources, and build complementary structures for more efficient service delivery or administration. Many organizations now pool their distinct capacities and expertise in long-term joint ventures and public-private partnerships. These smaller strategic partnerships are increasingly popular among nonprofits as a way to fulfill their missions and diversify their reach without duplicating or overextending resources.

2. Asset and capacity building: This type of coalition organizes disparate organizations, institutions, and sectors across one community or issue to create more comprehensive planning, program development, education, and resource creation. These coalitions
typically develop systematic efforts to solve common social, environmental, health, or economic problems or create structures that engage all sectors of a community, and advocate on their behalf for improved conditions and resources. Many such coalitions utilize an empowerment approach that emphasizes community building, increasing social capital, and leveraging assets within local control.

3. **Political action and progressive social change coalitions** alter rules, policies, and institutionalized practices of society, the market, or government. They seek to gain legitimacy and recognition from social change targets, and increase their credibility among potential allies. Such coalitions concentrate power by drawing upon the influence of their diverse membership. They minimize opportunities for the opposition to use tactics of co-optation, or “divide and conquer” defensive strategies (see Lee Staples’s “Seven D’s of Defense” in Chapter 5). These coalitions allow organizations to share risk and defuse blame, providing a measure of protection for groups who don’t want to be visible on an issue. In crisis situations that require a collective response, their temporality, mutability, and flexibility allow for rapid mobilization and the presentation of a united front.

4. **Movement building:** Some coalitions take on ambitious, proactive social change goals such as civil rights or environmental justice. They function as incubators for sustained social movements by providing collective spaces for organizations to learn about each other, forge a common political stance, and create a collective vision. Some coalitions evolve from a single to a multi-issue issue focus, or widen their definition of the issue (for example, supportive housing can be advanced by joining with other coalitions advocating for low-income housing). Modes of joint action connect different coalition efforts, and extend understanding across issues. In this way, self-organizing social movements can evolve from clusters of issue-based coalitions.

B. **Coalitions as Models of Interdependence**

1. **Appreciating Diversity:** Sometimes coalition experience enables members to transform their own perspectives and ways of working with others different from themselves. As models of intergroup relationship building or multiparty problem solving, coalitions expose members to diverse views and expertise and see new aspects of a shared condition or problem. Respect for differences can accompany a recognition that combining distinct entities can produce innovative solutions and possibilities for cooperation. The creative conflict can be unifying and integrative (Gray, 1989).
2. **Attitudinal and Behavior Change:** Coalition models have been particularly useful for health promotion and prevention of chronic disease. *Healthy communities* are examples of the many funded public health coalition efforts that strive to educate the public, reduce known risks, and improve health outcomes. Similar interagency coalitions have addressed automobile injuries and asthma, and increased nutrition, exercise, and access to health insurance. Involving government, professionals, service providers, and consumers, these coalitions align different perspectives on a particular problem and arrive at a framework for public response. They catalyze interdisciplinary professional expertise and social, religious, and cultural networks to create comprehensive interventions and increase public awareness and action.

3. **Transformation:** Like a kaleidoscope, the whole coalition endeavor is both greater than and different from the sum of its parts. Just as shifting a kaleidoscope rearranges the pieces to reveal different patterns, coalitions define and redefine themselves as products of the interaction of people with diverse values, views, skills, and resources. The transformation affects both individual members and their collective product. Recognition of interdependence deepens through reflection and interaction as a collective interest and culture emerge. Eventually, coalition members experience a shift from an autonomous to a collective perspective. This breakthrough produces synergy and generativity, which create entirely new collective products.

**UNDERSTANDING COALITION DYNAMICS**

**A Conceptual Framework for Coalition Building: “The 4 C’s”**

Our framework for effective coalition building requires four components: conditions, commitment, contributions, and competence (known as the “4 C’s”). First, the political, economic, and community **conditions** must be right for a coalition to form and evolve. Second, a core group of people representing the right mix of organizations must come together with a **commitment** to the goal and to the use of the coalition mechanism to achieve it. Third, **contributions** from member organizations—resources, power, and ideology—must be sufficient to achieve the coalition goal. Fourth, coalition participants must have the **competencies** to work on several fronts simultaneously—(1) advancing strategies to address external goals and social change targets, (2) maintaining the leadership core of coalition decision-makers, and (3) sustaining the activism of the organizational membership base.
The “4 C’s” are interactive and fluid, requiring alert adjustment in various dimensions of the work. For example, a change in external conditions can alter member commitment and contributions, as well as the viability of the coalition strategy and goal. Constant attention is needed to ensure reciprocity or “the exchange factor” between coalitions and their members. Members need to feel that they get something back to justify the time and resources they contribute. Perceived coalition progress toward outcomes, or delivery of expected benefits, will activate member participation. Coalitions with long-term or complex goals (i.e., peace) require interim victories or “proximal outcomes” (short-term accomplishments) to sustain membership, such as conferences, media events, and other community-building activities.

In exchange, members need to make contributions that sustain and strengthen the coalition. Contributions may be tangible resources such as staff and funds, or intangibles such as expertise on the issue or on coalition-building processes, connections to the media and/or to political and community leaders, access to a large constituency, and borrowing an organization’s power and reputation. The challenge for the coalition is to grapple with the concept of the “equivalency” of differential contributions. For example, is the strategic involvement of some organizations “in name only,” which lends critical clout to a coalition, equivalent in value to the steady on-the-ground participation of other members? Coalitions need to take an inventory of their commitments and contributions over time; members may need to replenish their contributions, renew their commitment, or recruit new participants and allies.

**Coalition Challenges**

Coalitions experience challenges related to (1) dynamic tensions, (2) operational difficulties, and (3) tacit expectations and risks. Anticipating and addressing these challenges can help to minimize or avert their destructive impact.

1. **Dynamic Tensions**

Coalitions are characterized by inherent dynamic tensions. Mutual interdependence often produces “antagonistic cooperation” and the need to reconcile equally compelling priorities. Coalition members are torn by **mixed loyalties** because of their dual commitments to the joint effort and to their respective organizations. Both **unity and diversity** are integral features of effective collaboration. While members agree to work together, they may hold different goals and outcome interests that affect choice of social change target, strategies, and solutions.
Differential resources, member contributions, variations in perspective, beliefs, values, language, race, or culture pose challenges for integrated efforts.

Coalition member organizations have differential amounts and kinds of power, including money, numbers of members, control of punishment, rewards, symbols, and information. Power dynamics not only influence member selection but also assumptions about future contributions and roles within the collaboration. The ability to influence or block change impedes operating in a shared-power model, where all participants expect to have some control of decision-making. Coalitions also need to balance autonomy to take independent action with accountability to their member organizations. Maintaining the connection to their individual bases often slows collective action, just as action without consultation with the base loses credibility and power.

2. Operational Difficulties
   a. Structure: Many coalitions lack formal organizational status and function without staff, much like boards of directors who are themselves volunteers with many other responsibilities. They may suffer from too little or too much structure, rather than finding dynamic ways to remain productive and mutually accountable. Some coalitions replicate the organizational hierarchy or multilevel bureaucracy of single organizations, which results in distancing potentially active members and stifling creative interaction. Coalitions that lack formal mechanisms to bind decisions and action may contribute to role confusion, communication problems, and other operational difficulties.

   b. Membership: The strength of any coalition comes from its active membership and the base that they represent. Membership recruitment itself is a challenge, since it is sometimes difficult to identify and engage influential stakeholders and affected constituencies. Coalition participants, who act on behalf of both their own organization and the coalition, are often ill equipped to fulfill this boundary-spanning, representative role.

   c. Struggling for Resources: Most coalitions require resources to maintain their internal processes, coordination among member organizations, and accountability to the base. Obtaining these resources can become a distraction from the true purposes for coalition building. The source and control of these resources are often a source of tension, especially when some coalition members are positioned as donors or lead agencies, or when coalitions compete against their own members for certain funds.
3. Tacit Expectations and Risks

a. Competing Priorities: Meaningful participation or leadership in coalitions demands a considerable investment, requiring organizations to balance their coalition involvement with other priorities in order to avoid depleting resources or facing coalition burnout.

b. Interdependence: Coalitions require members to sacrifice some of their autonomy in order to move toward shared meaning and blended group effort. This is a difficult change for many, requiring discomfort as people are asked to “leave home,” lose egos, shift priorities, suspend judgment, and make time for extensive dialogue and negotiation.

c. Uncertainty: Coalitions enter into uncharted waters. Many organizations are dissuaded from entering into coalitions because the path and the products are unknown. Members need to create their own ways of working together and strategies for achieving success. Initially, there are no clearly identifiable purposes and goals, and few guidelines or protocols. Uncertainty of outcome and the costs of collaborating pose additional risks.

d. Trust: Lack of trust is a major obstacle for coalitions. There may be misunderstanding or misinformation about different disciplines, organizations, or groups who share membership. Conflict over turf and control can work against the sharing of responsibility and credit for coalition efforts. Unequal status of participants and traditional patterns of dominance, respect, or intimidation create dynamics inconsistent with the egalitarian nature of coalition relationships.

HOW TO BUILD EFFECTIVE COALITIONS

Define Success in Multiple Ways

Effective coalitions allow for multiple definitions of success and aim for a variety of results. Success has been defined in terms of goal attainment, achieving legitimacy, increasing credibility, and longevity. Measures of success include achieving tangible results (solving problems, creating unique processes, completing plans, implementing programs, changing structures), the empowerment of a constituent group, developing new connections and access, and achieving desired changes in conditions of target populations.

For coalition participants, successful outcomes can include increased social support, well-being, and acquisition of new competencies. Ultimately, a coalition is considered to be effective if participants perceive that it achieved its goals, they attained something they wanted, their involvement
mattered, the payoffs exceeded the costs, and the process was fair and educational.

**Address Dynamic Tensions**

1. **Work with Conflict and Consensus:** Since conflict is an inevitable part of the coalition dynamic, coalition work should be approached as a conflict resolution/management model, where bargaining, tradeoffs, negotiating, and compromise are part of all decisions, and agreements are reached by mutual consent.

   Some remedies for managing internal conflict within collaborations include appeals to rationality, diplomacy, the use of third parties, isolating disputing parties, excluding controversial items from the agenda or maintaining tacit neutrality, giving each member veto power, airing and resolving disputes, or developing caucuses to facilitate intergroup negotiations. Teamwork principles, negotiation, and bargaining techniques also are essential. Shared goals and outcomes should drive the effort in order to avert power and turf issues. Sometimes agreeing to disagree is best; multiple strategies can be explored and diverse input and ideas can be welcome.

2. **Reassess Goals and Strategies:** Since commitment to the goal is a critical factor in sustaining involvement in a coalition, goals must remain salient to members and leaders. Any difficulty in attaining original goals needs to be explored and addressed. Should a goal change be necessary, the coalition may need to make other adjustments in membership, resources, outside support, or structure. If the goal remains appropriate, the strategies for reaching it may need to change in order to remain practical and effective.

3. **Cultivate Collaborative Leadership:** Coalition leaders need to articulate a vision around which diverse partners can collaborate and offer a constructive process for designing creative projects and solutions. They help reframe issues, translating them into a common language that reinforces the group’s vision and facilitates coalition dialogue. They have to balance and address the coalition’s simultaneous needs for movement toward external goals and cultivation of internal processes for engagement, coordination, and accountability.

   The ideal coalition leadership style is facilitative. Rather than directing the effort, facilitative leaders focus on building the capacity of the members to pursue a joint initiative, solve shared problems, identify operating procedures that “level the playing field,” and/or manage diversity. To promote broad and active participation, and facilitate productive group dynamics, they need to pay attention to both task and process. Coalition leaders need the skills to understand, listen to, and engage
people. This means taking time to build relationships, paying attention to people’s needs, and creating a structure that enables and encourages communication and dialogue.

4. Sustain and Develop Membership: To supply the requisite resources, membership recruitment should strategically include relevant stakeholders, diverse types of groups with varied perspectives and expertise. In coalition operations, vertical inclusivity also is important. Processes need to involve different layers of the base—the staff, board, and constituencies of the member organizations. To minimize mixed loyalties, members should be encouraged to express their needs, articulate their visions, and find incentives for their continued investment in the coalition.

Coalitions can balance the autonomy/accountability tension by creating a variety of ongoing communication mechanisms between the coalition and its members and their organizations, agreeing on what needs approval from outside the leadership core, and supporting boundary-spanning actions.

Manage Coalition Operations

1. Create “Just Enough” Structure: Coalition structures need to be loose enough to allow for variations in commitment and pace, and reliable enough to support accountability and keep the coalition focused on implementing strategies. The structure should support shared leadership and power; multiple levels for participation; mechanisms for expansion to accommodate new members, tasks, or components; and mechanisms for leadership succession or rotation. Many coalitions prefer to use steering committees with links to working committees, with all positions being open to any members. To avoid developing an entrenched core leadership group, it is useful to revisit the distribution of labor and cultivate new volunteers. Evaluation of both task and process also can be helpful in identifying necessary changes.

2. Sustain Resources: A variety of resources—vision, membership commitment, and funding—are needed to sustain coalitions over time. With changes in external variables such as political climate or funding opportunities, or internal variables such as membership loss or decisions to change goals, it may be necessary to take stock of the coalition’s resources and make relevant adjustments. Existing workload or strategies may need to be reduced if key resources are lost; new plans need to be realistic, given the resources likely to be obtained and sustained. Coalitions should plan realistically for funding to support the coordination mechanism to stabilize internal communications, including reporting mechanisms and documentation. Cultivating allies, funders, research
resources, change agents, and insider contacts should be a standard part of operations.

3. **Develop Collaborative Processes:** Because people often are unaccustomed to sharing power and responsibilities, coalitions need to create new norms and processes that provide a context for doing work together. Team building is essential to healthy coalition functioning and should be built into the process. Teamwork is enhanced when roles, rewards, and values promote group interdependence. Whether participants view collaboration as a win-win proposition or one of individual competition will affect their behavior and the group’s outcomes. Coalitions need to identify areas of individual and group responsibility, including clear directions for task rotation, task delegation, and the fulfillment of joint duties. It’s also important to sustain direction and focus amid changing external and internal conditions and priorities.

4. **Clarify expectations:** Coalition approaches entail some realignment of internal processes and resources in order to incorporate the work of diverse partners. Even when coalitions are more voluntary than contractual, they may need to utilize membership agreements to clarify commitment to shared goals and willingness to abide by certain group procedures. Some coalitions may require legal contracts for shared ventures or funding that become the joint responsibility of the member organizations. Specific roles for members can be delineated to help them incorporate their responsibility for coalition work into their daily work and priorities.

**Address Expectations and Risks**

1. **Cultivate Trust:** Coalition members need to operate with a high level of trust and interdependence, and be willing to risk sharing credit and risk for their joint endeavor. Understanding and mutual respect must be cultivated, particularly when there is a history of divisiveness or isolation among members. Time needs to be built in for dialogue, sensitive meeting facilitation, and individual expression of ideas and concerns. Clarification of expectations and responsibilities as well as areas of potential conflict can avoid difficulties. Mechanisms for mutual accountability, periodic evaluation, and processes for addressing operational problems can keep the coalition focused on specific steps, products, and desired outcomes.

2. **Go with the Flow:** Since coalitions spark new synergies and produce change for organizations, members should be open to this transformation. It helps to allow time to hear the full spectrum of ideas, negotiate
differences, and reach agreement. Approaching transformative work with others requires recognizing the unique knowledge of each participant. Experimentation and creativity are to be valued as essential tools for discovery. Participants also need to be prepared for trade-offs, tensions, and uncertainty as individual ideas blend into a shared concept.

3. Maintain Adaptability and Flexibility: Because so many different elements interact to affect coalition stability, flexibility in approaching the work is essential, and the most effective coalitions are “nimble” (Ray, 2002). Coalitions need to respond to changes in political or economic climate, altered relationships with targets and allies, emerging issues, and windows of opportunity. Internal conditions also shift as members come and go, resources change, and pace varies. Over time, it’s important to reassess past decisions, evaluate effectiveness, and make adjustments if necessary. Any of these changing conditions can call for changes in coalition goals, strategies, or processes.

Anticipate Developmental Changes

Coalitions experience varying needs as they evolve, and it’s important to attend to changing priorities.

Before formation, potential partners need to assess whether collaborating will advance individual organizational interests, stimulate innovation, or achieve larger social change goals. It is useful at this point to take stock of organizational capacity and see how compatible potential partners will be. Organizations will not be prepared for collaboration until they attain a solid infrastructure and have the capacity to devote effort and resources to a joint effort.

Once formed, the primary tasks are to organize the coalition, recruit members, establish a structure, identify goals and strategies, and clarify working relationships and decision-making and accountability mechanisms. Process tasks here include arriving at agreements about domain, ideology, administration, and evaluation and developing a common frame of reference, internal processes, norms, and culture.

The primary tasks of the implementation phase are to create and carry out an action plan, launch the project(s), produce preliminary results, and analyze progress to determine next steps. Parallel to these product tasks are process tasks, such as establishing a structure, tracking the work flow, and cultivating resources. If funding is in place, staff can be recruited and hired, contracts and subcontracts can be developed, and protocols for contract compliance can be created and tested at this point. As coalitions move to action, their primary interest shifts from process to substantive products. But processes still are needed to ensure that critical decisions about goals and priorities remain inclusive.
In the maintenance phase, projects move toward expansion or institutionalization, sustaining internal development while progressing toward goals. At this point, the coalition needs to sustain its work, keep members involved and informed, and reapprove or alter goals, activities, and strategies according to how things have been going. Some coalitions may need to replace members, recruit additional people in order to take on a new project, or represent a wider constituency. Others may change goals or take on new projects. Representation functions need to be reviewed and strengthened. Leadership development and evolving roles for collaboration experts within the group and across coalitions also need to evolve.

At some point, most coalitions reach the point of termination or transformation. They may have achieved their goals, completed their project, and decided to disband. Or their work may have been spun off and “institutionalized” independently or incorporated by another entity. Or perhaps the coalition decided to transform itself into a permanent organization. Whatever the decision, it is better to end by design than by default, creating lasting networks that can be resurrected.

**CONCLUSION**

Coalitions are viable, vibrant, and effective social change tools. With an awareness of inherent dynamics, and the use of current resources and knowledge about best practices, coalition building can be an asset to the organizer’s repertoire.

**REFERENCES**


MEMBERSHIPS AND DUES

David Beckwith

This article is based on a conversation with ACORN’s National Field Director, Helene O’Brien, and was conducted and edited by Madeleine Adamson.

When I became its director, the East Toledo Community Organization (ETCO) faced a financial crunch. It had thrived for five years on foundation and government funding but suddenly the money dried up. No VISTA volunteers, thanks to a conservative president. No Ford Foundation support, thanks to the changing fashions of the big funders. From a high point of seven organizers, each covering one neighborhood, we had two underpaid organizers and me, the new director with a generous contract and no money to pay for it.

Tackling the problem, we developed a fundraising plan with goals for new church giving, business donations, grassroots events, and, after long debate, memberships. The debate centered on two questions. First, was it right to ask people to pay dues to belong to the organization? After all, in its five-year history, ETCO had never asked for membership dues. Would people be turned off to ETCO? Could our constituency afford it?

As our most active leaders discussed the issues, we discovered that not only did they consider it right to ask for dues, but they also considered it strange that we hadn’t done so before. Every group they ever had been part of—unions, bowling leagues, PTAs, and even churches—routinely required a financial commitment. If ETCO is free, they said, how could it be worth much?

On the question of cost, though, there was plenty of controversy. A search of the files uncovered a survey taken three years before. The respondents unanimously agreed that ETCO should charge dues, but recommended rates of 50 cents or a dollar a year, hardly enough to be worth the effort.

That survey had been based on the idea of building a large membership list for its own sake. We wanted numbers, but we also wanted real money. So we settled on $2 a month—$24 a year—and decided to accept quarterly payments of $6 from folks who didn’t have the cash to pay in full.

The second question for debate was, “Will it work?” Would people give us their money? We decided the best approach would be personal—members going door-to-door signing up other members. We tried to take out some failure insurance by hiring a professional canvasser to teach us the tricks of the trade. It soon became apparent, though, that our goals were different;
Canvassing is oriented largely to reaching nightly fundraising quotas, while we were equally concerned with building organizational ownership and participation. In the end, the answer to “Will it work?” was, “Let’s try it and see.”

We targeted May as “Membership Month,” partly because we figured the cold weather would be over and partly because it just sounded good. The first task was to recruit and train volunteers. Initial neighborhood-based meetings were not too successful; then, on April 15, we staged the key event leading up to the membership drive. It was a free dinner designed to turn out lots of folks and turn them on to the idea of dues collecting. We hustled up donated hot dogs, rolls, beans, and so many onions that we gave them away as door prizes! We spent $28 and fed 150 people. We sang songs, yelled chants, staged a skit portraying a typical night on the dues trail, and before anyone left, asked them to sign up for a night of doorknocking.

We used the next two weeks to prime the pump. We had public service announcements on TV and radio, and articles in the weekly neighborhood newspaper. Every East Toledo church bulletin carried an announcement of the drive with a request from the pastor to “open your doors and your hearts.” We silk-screened posters proclaiming May as membership month and placed them in every neighborhood business. We printed a simple brochure, prepared record-keeping forms, and got deposit bags so we could deposit the cash in the bank each evening.

The drive kicked off on Monday, May 3. Five volunteers and one staff person met at a leader’s house at 6 P.M. After a brief orientation, they hit the streets armed with packets of press clippings and brochures. At 9 P.M. we rendezvoused back at the house to count the money, swap stories, and mark on a map the houses we had visited.

Results were mixed. The organizer collected $6 and no memberships. A young married couple collected $83, including three full paid memberships. In all, we got ten members and a total of $183. We were elated. Although lots of people weren’t home and lots said they couldn’t pay the whole $24, most gave something and no one had been openly hostile.

As the week went on, we found and shared techniques for being more effective—how to keep moving instead of talking with one person all night; how to set a time to come back when the person said, “I can’t give right now”; and how to get the basics across without giving a long speech at the door. In this last area, the outline professional canvassers use was easy to remember and got the job done—“I am, we are, this is, we want.” Following this outline, our volunteers developed their own personal styles.

“Hi, I’m Sharon Hess. I live over on East Broadway and I’m a volunteer with the East Toledo Community Organization—ETCO. Have you heard about ETCO? We’re working together for a better East Side. You may remember the trash dump-in at the Cherry Street Bridge last summer. Well, we organized that, and it was by working together that we got the city to take the limit off the number of bags we could put out for the trash collector.”
“This is a brochure on what we’re all about. This month we’re going door-to-door to get more people involved. We’d like your support, both in getting involved and financially. We’ve just started a membership drive and we’re offering family memberships for just $2 a month. Your $24 a year will go to help us get our flyers out, organize meetings, and work for a better neighborhood. Would you be interested in joining ETCO tonight?”

Each volunteer had her or his own approach. A retired union activist, who usually knew the person he was visiting or their family, would reminisce about the old days. The young couple often brought their eleven-month-old baby, which always helped them get a foot in the door. The husband was especially effective with folks who said they couldn’t afford the dues because they were unemployed. He’d point out that he was out of work too, but that it didn’t do any good to sit on your duff and complain—you had to get involved, make some sacrifices, and work for jobs through ETCO.

We printed bright orange stickers with ETCO’s logo and the word “Member,” which often helped clinch a sale: “I’d like to leave you one of these stickers if you could pay just a quarter of your dues, $6, tonight.” The volunteers reinforced what our flyers noted: “$24 a year is less than 7 cents a day, a candy bar a week, a six-pack of beer a month, a bus ride a week, a single tank of gas.”

On any night there was a chance that circumstances would wash us out. In the course of the month, we lost two nights to rain and one to folks just not showing up. We met at the same house each night, scrapping an earlier plan to rotate meeting places as too complicated. Generally, we tried to set up callbacks for Friday night, and those proved very productive. Two volunteers would take the whole week’s callbacks and drive around to collect money from each one. In seventeen nights of doorknocking, we got 161 memberships and 98 donations totaling $4,177. Because we received matching grants from the Needmor Fund (a local foundation) and a church-funding source, the drive actually represented $10,954 toward ETCO’s annual budget.

What we learned from the membership drive was significant. First, a neighborhood organization could change in midstream and establish membership dues. All our fears on that score proved completely unfounded. People would pay money to aid the organization, and the amount was not a significant block to giving.

We didn’t offer any tangible benefits, such as discounts at area stores or free prizes; we simply sold our track record. It helped us to have a good issue like trash pickup to hang our hat on; that provided almost universal recognition at neighbors’ front doors. By asking for $24, we established that we were very serious. Some people only paid partial dues and some only made small donations, but we did collect the full $24 from others.

Second, our system was effective. The routines we established, including
once-a-week pickups, worked smoothly. Our assumption that volunteers would do better than staff or paid canvassers was borne out. A statewide organization canvassed the same area later in the year, and their per-hour average was about half that of our volunteers. Even ETCO staff proved far less effective than neighborhood people, who could speak from the heart about their commitment to the organization.

Third, the membership drive helped ETCO attract outside funding. Funders that would not give us outright grants were willing to match the dues we collected, because we demonstrated that people in the community were willing to invest their own resources in the organization. Conversely, the matching grants helped bring in the dues. We could tell people that their $24 a year would mean $72 for the organization.

Finally, the membership drive was an organization-building opportunity. The fellowship and shared experience brought out the best in the eighteen or so volunteers who did most of the doorknocking. By selling ETCO door-to-door, they sold themselves more solidly on ETCO as well. Their loyalty and devotion to the organization were deepened. Of the five new general officers elected at our October convention, three were leaders who first got involved through the trash issue and later took part in the membership campaign.

Certainly, there were weaknesses too, and we learned from mistakes. We realized that it was better to rely on ourselves than on outside professionals. Eighteen people doorknocked at least twice, so there was fairly broad participation, but more workers would have spread the benefits further. Recruitment after the first week or so focused on getting four or five people committed each night, rather than spreading the workload to involve more people.

Although we had good results in the areas we were able to reach, we actually covered only about one-third of our turf. We didn’t even hit every house on the streets we covered, since we neglected to keep track of which houses were empty when we came by. The drive required such a total commitment from at least one staff person and several key leaders that we were reluctant to extend the effort beyond a month in order to cover the entire neighborhood. The mechanism for follow-up never really was put in place—so people who paid for half a year never got a phone call, letter, or visit reminding them to pay up. If we were to start again from scratch, these problems might be taken care of.

Overall, the “May is Membership Month” drive produced excellent results for our organization. It never will replace all the other kinds of fundraising a neighborhood organization does—grassroots events, business and industry solicitations, and church and other institutional support—but it can help build a firm foundation that attracts other funding. It also can give members and leaders a new source of pride in and ownership of their organization. The key is that we never believed it could not be done, so we did it.
From its founding in 1970, ACORN has been committed to the principle of financial self-sufficiency. This doesn’t mean that we don’t seek and welcome outside support, but our steady adherence to that goal has been key to ACORN’s longevity, growth, and success. There are several reasons why we place enormous value on dues and internal fundraising.

The first reason is that you work for whoever is paying you. Our members pay us, and we work for them. Reliance on dues makes organizers 100 percent accountable to the membership, not to some foundation or donor who may not want the organization to do certain things.

A second reason is that, ultimately, our members and the communities where we work are the most invested in whether we stay alive, whether we keep growing, and whether we are effective. Foundations eventually stop funding you, but if you deliver in the community, members will support you. They are the ones who keep us going.

The third reason is that the philanthropic world has done a poor job of keeping up with our expansion. In the past five years, ACORN has gone from organizing in twenty-one cities to sixty-three. Foundation funding hasn’t kept pace and, if anything, foundation contributions to community organizing have been decreasing. Hardly anyone wants to pay for the hard work of building an organization and developing capacity, so we have to know how to pay for it ourselves.

Basically, our analysis is that we have to find local people and local institutions that will fund us and who will do it on a consistent basis so we can count on it long term.

**MEMBERSHIP DUES**

Dues have always been central to ACORN’s operation. In the early years, ACORN members paid dues of a dollar a month or $10 a year. Organizers recruited new members through doorknocking, and many paid their dollar a month at monthly neighborhood group meetings.

ACORN organizers still doorknock to recruit members, and neighborhood groups still meet monthly, but the system for collecting dues is much more sophisticated and efficient today. The amount members pay is also dramatically different. Dues are now $10 a month or $120 a year,
and they are paid primarily through bank draft. ACORN dues rose gradually, first from $12 to $24 a year and more significantly to $60 a year in 1993. By then, we had realized both that we needed to rely more on our members for our financial security and that they were willing to pay more. Equally important, we had discovered the bank draft as an ideal mechanism for members to pay their dues automatically each month. Much like union members have dues taken out of their paychecks, the bank draft automatically transfers a set amount each month from the member’s bank account to the organization’s bank account.

While the bank draft system was a major breakthrough, it soon became apparent that at $5 a month, dues were not bringing in the kind of money the organization needed to grow and to pay its organizers a living wage. We looked at what members were paying to belong to other organizations, not only to their churches but also to groups like the New Party, an alternative political party that ACORN members helped establish. The New Party had a largely middle-class base, but even in ACORN’s low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, they were signing up members at $20 a month.

We decided to ask our members what they could afford and after a pilot project in a few places proved successful, ACORN doubled the dues to $10 a month in August 2003. Some members choose to pay more, and we also sign up middle-class supporters as sustainers, who contribute $50 a month, and local businesses at $100 a month.

The main membership recruitment technique still is doorknocking. When they fill out a membership card, new members pledge to pay $10 a month, and most of them provide the information to pay their dues by bank draft. Because people tend to make mistakes writing down their account information, we ask for a voided check or deposit slip with their account number on it. One of the greatest things about bank draft is that you don’t have to contact people about renewing their membership. It goes on indefinitely unless someone writes a letter to cancel it.

Of course, there are always some problems with bounced checks, closed accounts, wrong account numbers, and the like. Another drawback is that many of our low-income members simply do not have bank accounts. The bottom line is that to use bank draft as a dues collection method, an organization must have the capacity to keep careful track of transactions and it must reach a sufficient scale to make it work.

As a rule of thumb, ACORN figures that each organizer should sign up twenty new members a month. At that pace, the revenue from dues will soon be a significant part of the local organization’s income.

**BENEFITS AND SERVICES**

Over the years, ACORN has tried using benefits and services as a way to boost membership recruitment, with mixed but encouraging results. Dis-
count programs have not proved very effective, because it is hard to get discounts at the stores that really would make people join, like supermarkets. But the idea of a national discount benefit program for ACORN members is something we continue to explore.

Benefits and services, on the other hand, especially those tied to issue campaigns, bring people in the doors and provide a perfect opportunity to ask them to join. For example, in our national campaign against predatory lending, we negotiated agreements with two of the biggest offenders, Ameriquest and Household, that help victims get relief. We’ve gotten borrowers out of bad loans and secured better deals for them with lenders that have partnerships with ACORN. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that 100 percent of those who get this help become ACORN members.

On a local level, say, in San Jose, ACORN won a commitment from the city to establish a fund to help people pay their rent deposits. If all goes as planned, ACORN will do community outreach and marketing of the program, and in the process undoubtedly sign up new members.

Another approach we are developing is offering tax-preparation services to help people get the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) they are entitled to. In a pilot project in New Orleans, San Antonio, and Miami, we served nearly 750 people in the first four weeks of operation. And once we woke up and realized we should be asking them to join, roughly half of those who came for the tax service signed up to be members of ACORN. This program only works in big numbers for three months of the year, but it is something we are trying to develop for the whole country.

It can be hard, though, to hook up the service with the demand. In cases where the service actually brings people in the door, the demand can be so great that we can’t meet it and people get angry. Where the service is one that we can easily deliver, the demand may not be so great. It’s one of those things that we are always trying to figure out, but it’s an important component of our membership development efforts.

**OTHER GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING**

Just as ACORN’s system for dues collection has gotten more systematic, so has our approach to other types of nonfoundation fundraising. Our objective is to create reliable, replicable methods to raise significant amounts of money locally. Here are some examples:

*Bank fairs:* Many ACORN offices hold bank fairs once a year. This is a day-long event with workshops about how to get a mortgage and other loan products. We invite banks and realtors to buy a table or booth, where they can hand out literature and other freebies and meet prospective borrowers. Typically a bank fair raises $10,000 to $20,000.
**National Cleanup Day:** Every year on the weekend closest to ACORN’s anniversary, June 19, we hold a cleanup day in every ACORN city. Members sweep streets, clear vacant lots and alleys, and wash off graffiti. The fundraising angle is that we get local businesses to sponsor the event. A typical ACORN office will make $5,000 in sponsorships.

**Slow Down Traffic Day:** It is fair to say that garbage and speeding are the most frequently raised entry-level issues in communities across the country. We just opened a Hawaii chapter, and the first thing they wanted to deal with was speeding. When a local group is trying to get a traffic light or speed bumps installed, they will stage an event where they actually make their own speed bump, dress up in reflector gear, slow down cars, and hand out flyers telling them to slow down. Or they’ll do a caravan through the neighborhood at a very slow pace honking with decorated cars telling people to slow down. They invite politicians out and ask them to support a traffic device at certain corners or whatever the specific demand may be. And they ask businesses to sponsor the event. The businesses get their name on the flyer.

**Banquets:** Once an ACORN office is well established, an annual banquet becomes a good mechanism for raising local money. The banquet honors allies who have been really helpful—from the funding, business, political, or labor communities. Their colleagues, friends, and family buy tickets or tables. The pacesetter is New York, which made $250,000 at their banquet in 2003. That is way above the norm, but over time, the banquet becomes an important part of each office’s annual calendar of fundraising events.

What ACORN does not do much of anymore are grassroots fundraisers like chicken dinners and garage sales. Back in the days when an organizer’s salary was only $7,000 a year, members could really raise half of it with events like that. Now that a beginning organizer’s salary plus fringe, health insurance, and pension costs $33,000 a year, a fundraising event that has members working for two months to bring in a small amount just isn’t worth it. We have so many national and local campaigns requiring member involvement that having a group work really hard on something that will deliver $500, if you’re lucky, just isn’t a good investment.

Membership involvement in fundraising still is essential; it’s just on a different level. When ACORN approaches corporations and banks for support, it is the members who make the pitch. They are the best ones to convince local businesses to support the organization, and that effort has a greater payoff than the typical small-scale fundraiser.

Grassroots fundraising is hard, but I really believe it is the most radical thing one can do. It is the most revolutionary part of community organizing, and I think the fact that so many people do not want to do it is why the Right is winning. They have the money. For us to win, we need to commit ourselves to grassroots fundraising at a level sufficient to build a mass-based progressive movement.
Good meetings do not just happen. Planning, practice, and preparation all are essential. The responsibilities and tasks of top leaders need to be clearly understood and then executed with energy and skill. The rest of the members must be actively involved and plugged into meaningful roles. The meetings should be exciting and fun, efficient and productive. And success can turn on effectively performing basic mechanical and logistical details.

Below is a checklist of some of these specific tasks. Someone needs to get on top of them and make sure that they are done and done well. This may not be a glamorous job, but it’s an important one. The people responsible for these details can’t afford to drop the ball. A failure to think through and handle these “pieces” can jeopardize the entire meeting.

It is useful to visit the site about a week before the meeting (when turnout estimates are fairly accurate) to visualize the setup. A few basic questions come to mind if a large meeting is scheduled. Where will the front of the room be? While side exits will be required by law, only one entrance should be used, and this should be at the back of the hall so that latecomers won’t disrupt the meeting.

Should a stage be used, if it exists? Usually not. The strength of the organization lies in its large number of strong members, as well as the top leaders who may be sitting up front. A stage tends to create a less participatory dynamic where the audience watches the folks up front. Stages should be reserved for rallies, conventions, and potentially messy meetings that the leadership may have difficulty controlling.

What can be done to contract the size of the room for a small attendance? Tables for the leadership at the front of the room can be moved in from the wall, thereby shortening the room. A row of empty tables (with no chairs) can be used along one edge to help narrow the room. More than 150 people in a gymnasium can look like a pathetic gathering, while 50 in a tight room can seem like a crowd.

What about a sound system? For meetings of more than 100 people, a sound system often is desirable. Some halls have them built in—they should be tested for workability and whether they are portable or affixed to the stage. Equipment always can be rented if necessary, or, if finances permit, consider purchasing a portable sound system, which also can be used for outdoor actions.
Who will have the key to get in? Pickup arrangements should be made hours before the meeting, so there’s time to deal with any foul-ups. Someone should befriend the janitor and find out what shape the hall should be left in after the meeting. The group may want to come back.

Other things to check for:

**Chairs.** Are there enough, or will more have to be obtained? Always set up fewer chairs than the expected attendance. This helps fill up the front rows—which most people avoid, but which will be most visible. No one should be forced to stand, but as volunteers scurry to set up additional chairs, the commotion contributes to the notion that attendance is larger than expected.

**Electrical Outlets.** Do not assume that they all work. They may be used for a sound system, a slide show, or by television cameras. Check them before the meeting.

**Lights for the Hall.** Find out how the system works. This especially is important if a slide show will be used.

**Chalkboard (and Chalk) or Easel and Markers.** Always good to have—see what’s on the premises or what you need to bring.

**Thermostat/Air Conditioner.** Know where it is and how to use it.

On the day of a large meeting, a few volunteers need to get to the hall hours early for setup. Some things to consider are:

**Speakers’ Area.** Generally, the leadership should have a table up front. Water glasses may be helpful, especially for the nervous. If it’s a meeting or accountability session where a person will be pushed to respond to specific demands and questions, he or she should be placed on the “hot seat” slightly to the side with no table, so that feelings of isolation and vulnerability are heightened. It’s also important to make sure that the leadership, not the opposition, can maintain control of the sound system. An egg timer may be effective for limiting a long-winded speaker; listing the allotted speaking time right on the agenda also may be helpful, or, in extreme cases, cutting off the microphone.

**Sign-In Tables.** Tables should be set up at the entrance. Everyone should sign in, receive an agenda and literature, and have an opportunity to become a member. Friendly but assertive **Greeters** should work these tables and be there early. Part of their job is to make sure that the seats in the front rows are filled. These are the seats most likely to be photographed by the press—make sure they are not empty.

**Press Area.** At times it may be helpful to have a separate press table or seating near the front. One person should be assigned to work with the press, handing out releases and fact sheets, answering background questions, and arranging for interviews with key leaders. Staff who work with the press should not be quoted.

**Banners and Signs.** Large public meetings should feature lots of signs with slogans to decorate the hall. All should bear the group’s name for
press purposes; an organizational banner is an excellent backdrop behind the speakers’ area. This is great for television coverage and helps build momentum and hoopla for large meetings.

**Slide Shows.** If needed, the screen and projector should be lined up for proper distance and focus before the meeting; the sequence and direction of the slides also should be checked at this time. Always have an extra bulb and projector in case of a malfunction. If the equipment has to be removed for part of the meeting, the location of the screen and projector table can be marked with masking tape on the floor, allowing for a perfect setup within seconds. There should be one person on the lights, one to move the screen, one to move and run the projector, and one to narrate. If there’s a script to read, the narrator will need a reading light or flashlight (get extra batteries).

**Tape Recorder.** If the meeting is taped, all parties should be clearly informed. Deception only will create a false issue and may cost the organization moral superiority. On the other hand, someone who refuses to be taped may have something to hide, and that request should not be granted without a fight. Someone should know how long the tape will record and be assigned to turn it over and monitor the machine.

**Photography.** Volunteer photographers should be lined up well in advance and briefed on what to take. The objective is pictures that benefit the organization, not artful photography. There never should be empty chairs in crowd shots; camera angles should maximize attendance; and leaders and members should look strong and determined, opponents squirming and harried. Several cameras may be helpful—one with black-and-white prints for organizational newspapers, another with color slides.

**Videotapes.** Good videotapes can be an invaluable tool for leadership training and assessment sessions. In some instances it may be possible to hook into a local cable TV station. Again, the people doing the taping should understand the dynamics of the meeting. Do not assume that they do.

**Floor Teams.** All the group’s leaders won’t be sitting at the speakers’ table. It’s important that people in the crowd be participants rather than mere spectators. The floor team consists of leaders who play a role in the meeting while remaining in the audience. Specific tasks and functions will be worked out in the planning sessions held prior to any large meeting. The floor team might be responsible for asking specific questions, making demands, giving testimony, neutralizing hostile opponents, or firing up the crowd. Key people should be spread out in strategic locations from which they can act—some in the first couple of hard-to-fill rows of chairs. The leaders at the front need to know where people will be sitting in order to maximize the use of any floor team.

**Staff:** If there is more than one staffer, they should not be allowed to stand together at the back of the room. They should be split up, have technical jobs to perform, and keep a low profile.
**Buses.** On occasion, it may be necessary to use buses to move a large number of people to a meeting. Both buses and people frequently arrive late, and this can cause problems when timing is essential. Days before, someone should drive the route at the same time of day as the meeting in order to establish travel time. Departure time should be listed fifteen minutes earlier than the actual time for leaving; buses should arrive thirty minutes before real getaway time. A *Bus Captain* should be out to meet the bus at least fifteen minutes before it is scheduled to arrive. This person must know the travel route and should have the phone number of the bus dispatcher, in case there’s any problem.

The bus captain should make sure that everyone on the bus signs the attendance sheet, gets a briefing on the meeting (or action), and receives literature. This is the time to run through songs or chants that will be used at the main event. *Spirit* is the key to a good bus trip. The pace should be lively, and folks should arrive fired up and ready for action. Bus captains should inform everyone of the number or name of their bus if there are more than one. A sign with this designation should be taped to a side window to avoid confusion when returning. Tight plans should be made with the drivers for parking and leaving. They should be back and prepared to move at least fifteen minutes before the actual time of departure.

A list of common materials that may be needed includes banner (and a rope to hang it), poster board, masking tape, signs for bathrooms, chalkboard or easels, magic markers or chalk, sound system (e.g., will you need a floor mike?), extension cords, three-way adapters, egg timer, water pitcher and glasses, agendas, sign-in sheets, literature, membership cards, buttons, press packets, tape recorder, cameras (still and video), and film and equipment for a slide show.

All these details can make you feel a little compulsive, but that is better than having a poorly organized meeting. In fact, it’s a good idea to make an extra copy of the list of tasks and materials—just in case.
Appendix

This appendix includes materials typically used in an ACORN organizing drive. There’s a letter for neighborhood residents, which the Organizing Committee would draft. I’ve also inserted sample agendas for four Organizing Committee meetings, as well as a flyer and an agenda for a chapter formation meeting. Finally, there’s a list of suggestions for writing effective flyers.
Dear Watts Resident:

Problems like crime, speeding traffic, poor street and alley maintenance, stray dogs, and slow police response are bringing down our community. We need to do something about it. Many of us have tried calling and writing letters on our own, but this doesn’t seem to help.

We need a group. That is why we are organizing a chapter of the community group ACORN in this neighborhood. As an organized group, we will have the power to demand the services and protection that are our right. Come find out about your rights and how you can use them!

ACORN is an organization of low- and moderate-income families that is also active in other cities in California and around the country. Changes have been won in other communities, and we need to work together to make changes here. We believe that there is strength in numbers and that there is enough strength and determination in all of us to unite and improve our community. We need you.

You are invited to attend our first big community meeting:

For more information, please call the ACORN office at 213-747-4211.

Organizing Committee names, addresses, and signatures are then listed below.
Estimado/a residente de Watts:

Problemas como crimen, perros extraviados, tráfico recio, mal mantenimiento de las calles y los callejones, y la falta de vigilancia de la policía están destruyendo nuestra comunidad. Tenemos que hacer algo. Muchos de nosotros han tratado de llamar y escribir cartas solos, pero no nos parece que está ayudando.

Necesitamos un grupo. Por esto estamos organizando un grupo de la organización comunitaria ACORN en este barrio. Como un grupo organizado tendremos el poder demandar los servicios y la protección que son nuestros derechos. Vengan para aprender más sobre sus derechos y como se los pueden usar!

ACORN es una organización de familias de recursos bajos y moderados que también actúa en otras ciudades en California y por todo el país. Se han ganado cambios en otras comunidades, y necesitamos trabajar juntos para hacer cambios aquí. Creemos que la unión hace la fuerza, y que hay fuerza y determinación en todos nosotros para unirnos y mejorar a nuestra comunidad. Necesitamos a usted.

Le invitamos para asistir a nuestra primera gran junta de la comunidad:

Para más información por favor llame a la oficina de ACORN al 213-747-4211.

Nombres, direcciones, y firmas de los miembros del Comité Organizativo están escrito abajo.
ACORN

Sample Agenda / Agenda Borrador

Organizing Committee Meeting #1 / Comité Organizativo
Reunion #1

Facilitator / Facilitador: 

1. Welcome and Introductions / Bienvenida y Introducciones (5 min.)

2. What Is ACORN? / Que es ACORN? (5 min.)

3. Discussion of Community Concerns
Discusión de las Preocupaciones de la Comunidad (15 min.)

4. Vote to Organize / Voto para Organizar (5 min.)

5. Building Our Numbers / Aumentando Nuestros Números (15 min.)
   a. POWER IN NUMBERS / LA UNIÓN HACE LA FUERZA
   b. planning meetings, big meeting, action
      reuniones de planeación, reunión grande, acción
   c. doorknocking / ir a tocar puertas
   d. housemeetings / reuniones de casa
   e. commitments / compromisos

6. ACORN Membership / Membresía de ACORN (5 min.)

7. Next Planning Meeting / Proxima Reunion de Planeación (5 min.)

Who will offer their house for the next meeting?
Quién ofrece su casa para la siguiente reunión?
ACORN

Twenty-Eighth Street Chapter, Thursday, January 29, 2004 / jueves, 29 de enero, 2004

Organizing Committee Meeting #2 / Comité Organizativo Reunión #2

1. Welcome and Introductions / Bienvenida y Introducciones  Clementina Caro (5 min.)

2. What Is ACORN? / Que es ACORN?  Julia Botello (5 min.)

3. Discussion of Community Concerns  Cruz Quevedo (15 min.)
   Discussion de las Preocupaciones de la Comunidad
   • long-term versus short-term issues
     separando los temas mas grandes de los mas inmediatos

4. Building Our Group / Construyendo Nuestro Grupo
   a. review of the process / repaso del proceso
   b. first big meeting: where and when?  primera reunion grande: donde y cuando?
   c. what is our goal for attendance?  cual es nuestra meta para asistencia?

5. Building Our Numbers / Aumentando Nuestros Numeros  Marta Perez (15 min.)
   a. doorknocking / ir a tocar puertas
   b. housemeetings / reuniones de casa
   c. phone lists / listas de telefono
   d. petitioning at school / consiguiendo firmas en la escuela
   e. Who will be a Block Captain? / Quien sera Capitan de Cuadra?
     other commitments / otros compromisos

6. ACORN Membership / Membresía de ACORN  Marta Perez (5 min.)

7. Next Planning Meeting / Proxima Reunion de Planeacion  (5 min.)

Who will offer their house for the next meeting?  Quien ofrece su casa para la siguiente reunion?
ACORN

Sample Agenda / Agenda Borrador

Organizing Committee Meeting #3 / Comité Organizativo Reunion #3

Facilitator / Facilitador: [Name]
Translator / Traductor: [Name]

1. Welcome and Introductions / Bienvenida y Introducciones (5 min.)
2. What Is ACORN? / Que es ACORN? (5 min.)
3. Discussion of Community Concerns / Discusion de las Preocupaciones de la Comunidad (15 min.)
   a. review of last week’s list / repaso de la lista de la semana pasada
   b. report—what else do we know about each issue? / reporte—que mas sabemos de cada tema?
4. Big Meeting / Reunion Grande (15 min.)
   a. finalize—where and when? / finalizar: donde y cuando?
   b. review of our goal for attendance / repaso de nuestra meta para asistencia
5. Reaching Our Attendance Goal / Logrando Nuestra Meta (15 min.)
   a. Who will be a Block Captain? / Quien sera Capitan de Cuadra?
   b. phone lists / listas de telefono
   c. flyers / volantes
   d. Where else can we get the word out? / En que otro lado podemos publicar el evento?
      schools / escuelas—Who can take a petition and flyers?
      churches / iglesias—Quien puede llevar una petición y volantes?
6. ACORN Membership / Membresía de ACORN (5 min.)
7. Next Planning Meeting / Proxima Reunion de Planeacion (5 min.)

Who will offer their house for the next meeting? / Quien ofrece su casa para la siguiente reunion?
ACORN

Comité Organizativo Reunión #4 / Organizing Committee
Meeting #4

Facilitadora / Facilitator:

1. Bienvenidos y Introducciones (5 min.)
   Welcome and Introductions

2. Por que organizarse? Que es ACORN? (5 min.)
   Why organize? What is ACORN?

3. Reunion Grande / Big Meeting (20 min.)
   a. finalizar lugar y hora / finalize place and time
   b. asistencia—Cual es nuestra meta final? turnout—What is our final goal?
   c. asistencia—Cuales son nuestras metas individuales? turnout—What are our individual goals?
      (contact forms) (formas de contacto)
   d. reporte—Quien ha hablado con iglesias, escuelas? Proximos pasos report—Who has spoken with churches, schools? Next steps
   e. banco telefonico—Que dia podemos hacerlo? phone banking—Which day can we do it?
   f. volantes y peticiones / flyers and petitions

4. Accion / Action (10 min.)
   a. finalizar tema / finalize theme
   b. finalizar lugar y hora / finalize place and time
   c. finalizar lista de invitados / finalize who we want to invite

5. Nominaciones / Nominations (15 min.)
   a. How leadership works in ACORN / Como funciona el liderazgo en ACORN
   b. Nominaciones / Nominations

6. Membresía / Membership (5 min.)

7. Otros Anuncios / Other Announcements (5 min.)
Safe Schools & Neighborhoods **Now**!

*We're residents of South LA and we want safe and healthy schools and neighborhoods. We are mad because a paint factory is planning to open close to where our children go to school!*

Together, taking action, we can make a difference in our community.

Join us for an important community meeting and to find out more about what they have planned for our neighborhood:

**Tuesday, June 10 – 6:30 p.m.**
**Main Street Elementary**
**129 E. 53rd St.**
(entrance on Broadway)

For more information call Mayra or Peter at ACORN
(213) 747-4211 ext. 212
Los Angeles ACORN

Community Meeting / Reunion de la Comunidad

Chair / Facilitador: 
Translator / Traductor: 

1. Welcome and Introductions / 
   Bienvenida y Introducciones 
   (5 min.)

2. What Is ACORN? / Que es ACORN? 
   (5 min.)

3. Discussion of Community Concerns 
   Discusión de la Preocupaciones de la Comunidad 
   (15 min.)

4. Presentation of the Initial Plan of Action 
   Presentacion del Plan de Accion Preliminar 
   (15 min.)
   a. overview of the problem / 
      repaso del problema
   b. action: (date) / accion: (fecha)
   c. Who can be there? / 
      Quien puede estar allí?
   d. Who can take flyers? / 
      Quien puede tomar volantes?
   e. Practice of songs and chants / 
      Practica de consignas

5. Election of Temporary Officers 
   Eleccion de Oficiales Temporales 
   (10 min.)
   a. review of nominees / repaso de nominados
   b. vote / voto

6. ACORN Membership / Membresia de ACORN 
   (10 min.)
   a. how it works / como funciona
   b. Who is not yet a member of ACORN? 
      Quien todavía no es miembro de ACORN?

7. Block Captain System 
   Sistema de Capitanes de Cuadra 
   (10 min.)
   a. What is it? / Que es?
   b. Who will be a Block Captain? / 
      Quien sera capitan de su cuadra?

8. Announcements and Other / Anuncios y Otro 
   (5 min.)
Making a flyer isn’t art, but making a good flyer is an art.

ACORN Organizer

Don’t Forget:

1. Always use colored paper instead of white. Use the same color for flyers within the same local group and throughout the organizing drive to facilitate instant recognition of a notice from the organization.

2. The use of the DAY as well as the DATE is very important: Thursday, July 29.

3. The fewer words, the better.

4. Small illustrations are good, but a flyer should not be too cluttered looking.

5. Make the NAME of the local organization clear.

6. The name of the “parent” organization and logo should be prominent, when applicable. Make it clear who is organizing the meeting.

7. Include a phone number for rides and more information.

8. Answer the basic questions:
   - Why should somebody come?
   - What is the purpose of the meeting/action?
   - What will be done?
   - When will it be?
   - Where will the meeting/action be held?
   - How do you get there? If it is an unusual location, give directions: “Meet by the water fountain at City Hall.”

References


References


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Afterword

After Words, Take Action

Now, more than ever, there is a need for people to join together and take collective action. Every day it seems like we have less control over the institutions and forces that affect our lives. Real income continues to shrink, services are being slashed, living costs are rising, pollution is spreading, and wealth is becoming even more concentrated in the hands of a few. There is no shortage of issues to organize around. And, like ACORN’s famous chant, more and more of us are “Fired up! Won’t take it no more!” That means people are ready to organize, ready to fight for basic changes, and ready to wield their collective power.

I hope that this book will be a useful guide for those who organize, inspiring action as it instructs about what can be done. I have attempted to show how power can flow from the grassroots in a bottom-up process. I’ve tried to lay out some principles, strategies, and methods that can help people take collective action for change, whether the issues be immediate or long range.

But a book can only point the way. It can’t take action. It can’t fight for economic and social justice. Community members have to do that themselves. That’s what organizing is all about. For the powerless, there’s only one course to follow. Organize! Struggle! Become powerful!
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HELENE O’BRIEN has been organizing for fifteen years with ACORN. She organized tenants to win improvements in New York City public housing projects, parents to win school reform, and immigrants to win jobs and housing. She was the Head Organizer for ACORN’s chapters in the Bronx and Manhattan. For the past five years, she has been the organization’s

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