

# 7 Principles of Community Organizing

By Chuck Warpehoski, Director, Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice

## 1. Organizing > Activism

Activism is an individual pursuit, when one person takes an action to make a difference. It is a great thing. But organizing is greater, because organizing gets *other* people to take action, to work together, and to build an *organization* that can make a significant and long-term difference.

## 2. Organizing is about relationships

To organize people, you need to know them. You need to know who they are, what they care about, what they are willing to do, and *how to get in touch with them*. They also need to know you. They need to know you are sincere, competent, and that you care about them. Therefore, an organizer is always building and maintaining relationships. An organizer is also always asking people to *sign up* so that she can follow up and build that relationship. Finally, since an organizer is building an organization that is bigger than herself, she is tracking these relationships in a database so that the organization can ask people to get involved at scale.

## 3. Meet people where they are, not where you want them to be

As an organizer, you are immersed in an issue. You read all the blog posts. You lay in bed thinking about it. You talk about it *every day*.

That's not true for most of the people you will be organizing. They might eventually get to where you are, but you need to start *where they are*. What do they know? What do they care about? What do they hope for and what do they fear? You find this out through a combination of empathy and listening.

Don't be fooled, though, projecting your own insecurities is not the same as empathy. I get caught in this one sometimes, where my insecurities tell me, "oh, they don't want to be bothered by me." But when I look back at when people have given me the chance to make a real difference, whether by helping them move or joining in a cause they care about, I'm generally *happy* to help.

## 4. An organizer defines success on her own terms and develops a campaign to advance toward victory

If you do not define victory on your own terms, the opposition will define it for you. "Oh, you want us to do something about the homeless. Sure. Would you rather we lock 'em all up, or just drive them out of town."

Knowing what success means to you, you can then put together a *campaign*—a series of varied activities over time that move you forward toward victory. There are many tools you can use in the campaign, your job is to pick the ones that move you forward. Rallies, lectures, civil disobedience, social media actions, etc. can all be great tactics, but they should be selected based on how they move you forward.

## 5. Focus on Action--always have something people can DO

Every activity you take should include an ask for people to do something: make a donation, sign up for a tabling shift, write an email to the Mayor, etc. "Raising awareness" can be a means to your end in this process, but it is never your end in itself. I am perfectly aware that I need to limit my sweets, but that awareness did not stop me from eating two desserts yesterday. Awareness that does not contribute to concrete change in behavior, actions, or relationships is a dead-end.

## 6. You get action by asking for it

To get people to take action, you have to ask for it, and you have to set that ask up for success. That means:

- **Make it easy to say yes.** If you are asking someone to call their Representative, make it easy for them to say yes. Give them the phone number. Give them a sample script. Maybe even hand them your phone to make the call. Eliminate every barrier you can that will get in the way of them saying "yes."
- **Make your ask specific.** This is part of making it easy to say yes. Which is easier for you to process, "Can you help out?" or "Can you volunteer to sell yard signs next Thursday from 10-2 at the Art Fair Table?"
- **Ask for fewer things at a time, not more.** Too many options can overwhelm people, and rather than choose between them, they just tune out. Don't give 20 options, give one. Maybe two. No more than three.
- **Engage the heart.** Emotion is more important for motivating action than facts and figures.
- **Follow up.** We're all busy, and we sometimes need that reminder to actually follow through on our best intentions. Polite but persistent follow-up can be the difference between "yes, I'll make that call" and actually making the call. What's more, that personal touch of following up also deepens the relationship.

## 7. Diverse and inclusive coalitions are stronger, building it takes work

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice is founded on the premise that we are more effective when we work *together* across our differences to make a difference. Diverse coalitions bring new ideas, help you reach broader audiences since "like organizes like." Furthermore, diverse coalitions help you tap the power of unlikely allies (e.g. Veterans for Peace, Gun Owners for Smart Gun Laws).

But it takes work to create truly diverse and inclusive communities. It's not enough to say, "our doors are open to them, but they won't come to our table." Sometimes you have to go to them, knock on their doors, sit at their table, and be willing to change your agenda to meet their needs.

Building diverse coalitions also requires that you respect differences. If you are creating an interfaith coalition, a Saturday morning activity during the Jewish Sabbath isn't going to work, for example.

Finally, if your coalition is diverse, you will run into structural power dynamics. For example, often voices of people of color are marginalized in mainstream society. To create a diverse and inclusive coalition, then, you need to recognize this dynamic, be attentive to how it affects your work (it will), and consistently take steps to address it.