

Organizing Notes

What Is Organizing?

Week 1

Leadership in organizing is rooted in three questions articulated by the first century Jerusalem sage, Rabbi Hillel:

*“If I am not for myself, who am I?
When I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?”¹*

These three questions focus on the interdependence of self, other, and action: what am I called to do, what are others with whom I am in relationship called to do, and what action does the world in which we live demand of us now?

The fact these are framed as questions, not answers, is important: to act is to enter a world of uncertainty, the unpredictable, and the contingent. Do we really think we can control it? Or do we have to learn to embrace it? Uncertainty poses challenges to the hands, the head and the heart. What new skills must my “hands” learn? How can my “head” devise new ways to use my resources to achieve my goals? How can my “heart” equip me with the courage, hopefulness, and forbearance to act?

Leadership requires “accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose under conditions of uncertainty”.² Conditions of uncertainty require the “adaptive” dimension of leadership: not so much performing known tasks well, but, rather learning what tasks are needed and how to perform them well. It is leadership from the perspective of a “learner” – one who has learned to ask the right questions – rather than that of a “knower” – one who thinks he or she knows all the answers. This kind of leadership is a form of practice - not a position or a person – and it can be exercised from any location within or without a structure of authority.

Organizing is a form of leadership. Organizers identify, recruit, and develop the leadership of others; build community around that leadership; and build power from the resources of that community. Organizers do not provide services to clients or market products to

¹ Pirke Avot (Wisdom of the Fathers)

² Marshall Ganz, “Leading Change: Leadership, Organization and Social Movements”, Chapter 19,

customers. They organize a community to become a constituency – people able to “stand together” on behalf of common concerns.

Organizers ask three questions: Who are my people? What is their urgent problem? How can they turn their resources into the power to solve their problem? They answer the questions in dialogue with their constituency by building relationships, telling stories, devising strategy, designing structure and taking action.

Organizers develop new relationships out of old ones - sometimes by linking one person to another and sometimes by linking whole networks of people together. One result is the formation of new networks of relationship wide and deep enough to provide a foundation for a new community in action.

Organized communities acquire agency – the capacity to act – by articulating why they must act – their **story**—and imagining how they can act —their **strategy**.

Organized communities learn to tell their story, a public narrative, of who they are: where they came from, where they are going, and what they must do to get there. Organizers work through narrative to deepen people’s understanding of their values, their capacity to share them, and to draw upon them for the courage to act. They learn to mobilize the feelings of urgency, anger, hope, empathy, and dignity, to challenge the feelings of inertia, apathy, fear, isolation, and self-doubt that inhibit action.

Organized communities learn to strategize how they can turn resources they have into the power they need to get what they want. Organizers engage people in understanding how they can act by deliberating on their conditions, locating the responsibility for those conditions, devising ways they could use their resources to change those conditions, a theory of change, and translating that theory into specific goals.

Organized communities accept the responsibility to act. Empowerment of a person begins with taking responsibility. Empowerment of a community begins with commitment – the responsibility its members take for it. Responsibility begins with choosing to act. Organizers challenge people not only to act, but also to act effectively.

Organized communities build relationships, tell stories, devised strategy, and take action most effectively with the support of a structure based on coaching, teamwork, and leadership development. They operate with leadership teams, based on shared purpose, interdependent roles, and agreed upon norms, avoiding the fragility of a single person doing it all or the chaos

everyone doing everything. They create widely distributed leadership opportunities, cascading outward, like a snowflake, as opposed to narrowly held opportunities. They exercise accountability and offer support through ongoing coaching. In this way they can build communities which are bounded yet inclusive, communal yet diverse, solidaristic yet tolerant. They work to develop a relationship between a constituency and its leaders based on mutual responsibility and accountability.

Organizers work through campaigns. Campaigns are highly energized, intensely focused, concentrated streams of activity with specific goals and deadlines. Through campaigns, people are recruited, programs launched, battles fought, and organizations built. Campaigns polarize by bringing out those ordinarily submerged conflicts contrary to the interests of the constituency. One dilemma is how to depolarize in order to negotiate resolution of these conflicts. Another dilemma is how to balance campaigns with the ongoing work of organizational growth and development. And, win or lose, each campaign must conclude with analysis, learning, and celebration.

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Chart #1: What Is Organizing?



Chart #2: Three Ways to Combine



Chart #3: Two Ways to Structure Time

