

What Is Organizing?

(2011)

Organizing is a form of leadership 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 us on the interdependence of self, other, and action: who am I, what am I called to do; who are the others with whom I interact, and what are they called to do; and what does the world in which we find ourselves demand of us in action?

The fact these are framed as questions, not answers, is important: to act is to enter a world of uncertainty, the unknown, the novel, the world of change. Do we really think we can control it? Or do we have to learn to embrace it? This uncertainty, in turn, poses a challenge to the hands, the head and the heart. What skills must my "hands" learn to act now? How can my "head" translate my resources into outcomes? 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 It is required under conditions of uncertainty – change is needed, the system breaks down, contradictions are evident, ambiguity abounds, etc. These are conditions that 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 the right questions – rather than that of a "knower" – one who has all the answers. It also means leadership is practice not a position. In other words, it can be exercised from any location within or without formal organizations, and is thus distinct from "authority", right of command.

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 enable a community to become a constituency – people who have learned to "stand together". Organizers challenge people to act on behalf of shared values. They develop the relationships, story, strategy, structure and action to deepen understanding of interests, find new

¹ Pirke Avot (Wisdom of the Fathers)

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

resources, and create new capacity to use these resources to advance these interests. Organizers work through "dialogues" in relationships, story, strategy, structure and action carried out as campaigns.

Organizers interweave relationships, story, strategy, structure and action so each contributes to the other. One result is new networks of relationship wide and deep enough to provide a foundation for a new community in action. Another result is a new story about who this community is, where it has been, where it is going, and why it must get there. A third result is strategy envisioning how a community can turn the resources it has into the power it needs to get what it wants. A fourth result is structure that facilitates interdependent leadership, teamwork, and cascading growth as learners become teachers. And a final result is action as the community mobilizes and deploys its resources on behalf of its interests -- as collaboration, claims making, or both.

Organizers develop new relationships out of old ones - sometimes by linking one person to another and sometimes by linking whole networks of people together.

Organizers engage people in interpreting why they should act to change their world – their **story**–and how they can act to change it –their **strategy**.

Organizers motivate action by deepening people's understanding of who they are, what they want, and why they want it. Mobilizing feelings of urgency, anger, hope, empathy,, and self-worth, they challenge feelings of inertia, apathy, fear, isolation, and self-doubt that inhibit action.

Organizers engage people in articulating why they should act as a shared story of the challenges they face, why they – and others – must act to face those challenges, and where the hope is.

Organizers engage people in understanding how they can act by deliberating about their circumstances, reinterpreting them to identify new opportunities, and strategizing to make creative use of their resources.

Organizers challenge people to take the responsibility to act. Empowerment for a person begins with taking responsibility. Empowerment for a constituency begins with commitment, the responsibility its members take for it. Responsibility begins with choosing to act. Organizers challenge people to understand, as well as to commit, to act, and to learn how to act effectively.

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.

Organizers build community by designing structure to develop leadership. They develop leaders by enhancing their skills, values, and commitments. They build strong communities through which people gain new understanding of their interests as well as the power to act on them -- 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.

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Charts, Week 1

Chart 1: What Is Organizing?



Chart 2: Three Ways to Combine



Chart 3: Five Leadership Practice



Chart 4: Two Ways to Structure Time

