

ORGANIZING IS FOR EVERYONE

a guide for
the emerging
activist

by
Claude
Olson

*"every moment
is an organizing
opportunity,
every person a
potential activist,
every minute a
chance to change
the world."*

-dolores huerta

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what is organizing, anyway?

i'm so glad you asked!

organizing is the practice of building, well, organizations.

this guide focuses specifically on *community organizing*, a form of social activism that builds a membership base out of individuals and sometimes pre-existing institutions, such as labor unions. this base generally focuses on a certain domain and creates a campaign directed at those who have the power to create positive change within that domain (Sen, xiiv).

for example, a voting rights campaign may push for leaders in the state or federal government to enact policies that support electoral equity.

the beauty of community organizing is that it is powered by regular people, united by a shared vision of justice. anyone can be an organizer.

really? ANYONE?

yes, ANYONE! *anyone* can be an organizer.

you do not need a college degree or a certain amount of work experience to be an organizer.

organizing comes about when regular people facing systems of injustice realize they are not alone in the struggle. it becomes a movement when all these regular people come together to fight for their collective rights.

*"we have to use all our resources and it doesn't have to be money and power. it's really people power and showing them that **when people come together, great things can happen.**"*

-chris smalls, lead organizer of the amazon labor union

("The Man Behind the Latest Push to Unionize Amazon")

what do we want? ...let's figure it out.

when you think of an organizing campaign, you may imagine that the lead organizers knew exactly what they wanted when the fight began. but that's not always the case!

you can experience injustice before you know how to solve it. first, believe justice *can* be achieved. second, imagine what justice looks like to you. what must change in order to get there?

as you set your goals, consider dean spade's four primary questions for evaluating reforms and tactics:

questions

1. does it provide material relief?
2. does it leave out an especially marginalized part of the affected group?
3. does it legitimize or expand a system we are trying to dismantle?
4. does it mobilize people, especially those most impacted, for ongoing struggle?

examples

1. changing behavior beyond passing an anti-discriminatory policy
2. people with criminal records cut out from immigration reforms
3. police reforms that increase the number and/or equipment of police
4. the queer rights movement knowing that the struggle did not end when same-sex marriage was legalized. for many, including BIPOC and trans folx, the fight needed to continue

(Spade, 132-133)

organizing the organizers

no one can, nor should go it alone.

the key to a **grassroots** movement is regular people's collective power. while organizing campaigns don't tend to have the hierarchical structure of a typical establishment, they do need some form of structure.

advice from rinku sen

- consistently and collectively **evaluate** everyone's role and contributions
- institute requirements for leadership turnover, to make room for new leaders
- **share leadership**, so at least the most important decisions are made together
- **delegate** decision-making power to those responsible for carrying out a particular project
- use a variety of decision-making models (i.e., majority rule, consensus) at different times
- institute a **planning system** to avoid individuals needing to make last-minute decisions

"whatever the structure, it needs to be clear and transparent to all involved, maintained in a fair manner, and flexible enough to be changed thoughtfully according to the needs of the constituency."

(Sen, 28)

how do organizers become powerful?

"power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have." (Alinsky, 127)

-saul alinsky

what alinsky means is that even the smallest of movements can hold power. a few members can make the noise of a hundred, and "if your organization is too tiny even for noise, stink up the place." (Alinsky, 126)

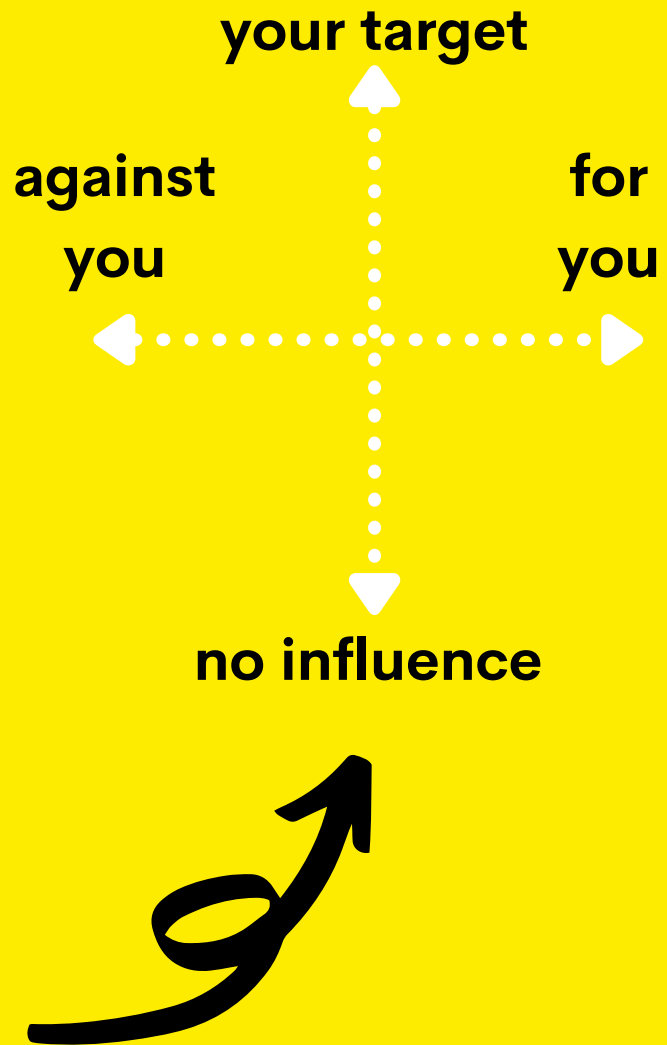


the key to accessing power is recognizing the structures of power already in place. on the next page is an exercise to help you get started.

let's make a power map.

follow these steps with your team:

1. determine the **goals** of your campaign.
2. who are your **targets**? i.e., the key decision-makers of this issue. who has the power to meet your goals? start a list of stakeholders, beginning with your targets.
3. who is most affected by this issue? think about how they could **influence** your target. add them to the list.
4. go through the list and determine the following about each stakeholder: how much **power** do they have? where do they stand on this issue?
5. add each stakeholder to the appropriate spot on a chart like this one.



6. how do these stakeholders **connect** to one another? draw arrows between those that have something in common

7. where do you get **started**? circle the stakeholders who will be the first you want to direct your effort towards.

8. determine with your team how you will **begin** this effort. continue to refer to your power map for guidance as you campaign

alright, it's time to get to work!

let's talk strategy:

now that you have your targets, how are you going to go about influencing them?

we're going to focus on two strategies,

"bottom-up" and "inside/outside"

bottom-up

this model is a direct antithesis to the socially accepted mode of activism: as dean spade puts it, "we are encouraged to bring our complaints in ways that are the least disruptive and the most beneficial to existing conditions."

starting at the bottom means...

- dismantling harmful systems and pushing back against their expansion
- directly providing for the people these systems target
- building an alternative infrastructure to replace the current system and meet people's needs

(Spade, 134)

inside/outside

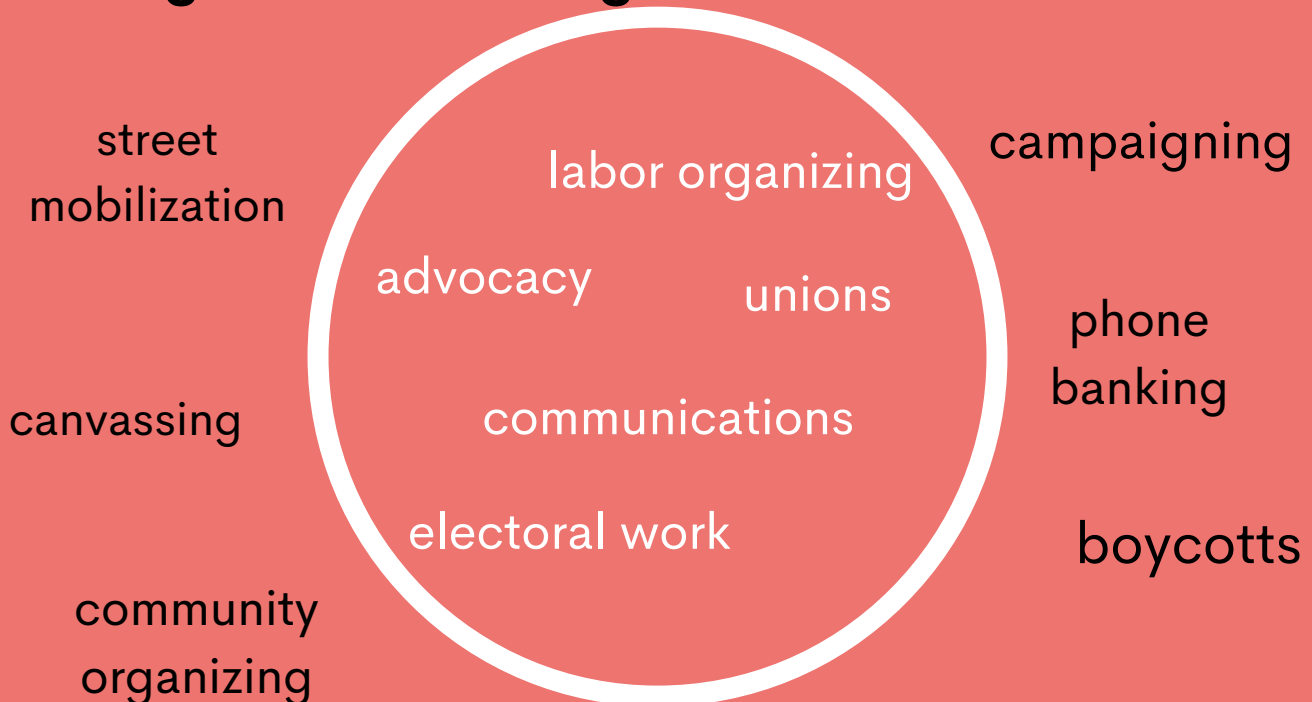
this model focuses on the conflict between "inside" organizing, working within the institution you're going up against (ex. Amazon workers organizing strikes from within their union) and "outside" organizing, working outside of the institution (ex. consumers protesting Amazon with boycotts).

often used in electoral political organizing, an inside/outside campaign is successful when each side can support the other to collectively pressure the institution where the two sides converge.

"How to make fundamental social change in advanced capitalist countries is a historic strategic dilemma of radicals and revolutionaries throughout the world... However, it is hoped that deploying a unified inside/outside strategy...may enable us to make a breakthrough in becoming a serious force in national politics and in turn put that question on the table in a practical way."

-bob wing

working inside and out looks like... uniting outside strategies...



...with inside strategies

(Wing, 10)

where do we go from here?

now, more than ever, we need bold and effective organizers to take on the challenges of our modern world. issues like climate change, voter suppression, reproductive injustice, and police violence will only grow in scope and severity without direct action.

however, i remain optimistic about the future. i assembled this guide because i believe in the power of community, of a collective fighting for each other and for a shared vision of a better world.

i hope this guide proves useful as a tool to help you find your footing in the world of organizing.
i wish you all the best.

"Hope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair."

-bell hooks

reflections from an emerging activist

though this guide was created to serve as my final project for a college course, i would be lying if i told you that was the sole reason i created it. in actuality, building this document was an act of self-reflection, a way to re-examine my relationship with change-making work.

i've always struggled to consider myself an activist. putting on the word gives me a sense of imposter syndrome. have i *actually* done anything meaningful in the world of social justice? do i even know how to?

taking a collective organizing course gave me insight into the theories, methods, and major conversations of activism but i continued to feel like an imposter. others in my class were going out and participating in marches, creating petitions, fighting for union rights... meanwhile, i didn't have a clue of how to be an organizer or where i could get started. for so long, i figured it wasn't worth the bother, that it was too late to get my foot in the door.

but i realized by the end of the course, after laying the groundwork for an organizing project focused on title ix, that maybe i did have it in me to be an activist. i just never had anyone to tell me that was the case.

so, i want to be that person for others. this guide is titled "organizing is for everyone" because people aren't often given that message. at least in my experience, i sense a lot of gatekeeping in the world of organizing, like you must be college educated or be able to read complex texts with dense language and unnecessarily advanced vocabulary to participate. i shudder at the idea of restorative justice trainings costing the same as college tuition, of books devoted to sharing the principles of organizing but clearly written for an audience of academics, of social media posts that shame anyone who tries to make change but slips up in some minor way. I hate that we have to perform this idea of "perfect activism."

organizing is supposed to be for the disenfranchised, the working class, those for whom institutions systemically underserve. but how are those with the greatest strife supposed to organize with these barriers? i tried to make this guide as clear as possible, translating the language of academic texts into a series of guidelines, turning theories into actions, and providing steps people can take, laid plain and simple.

everyone *should* be an organizer. we just need to make it so everyone *can*.

about the author



hello! i'm claudé. i am an education & child study major at smith college and a student of many other things. my passions include poetry, disability justice, random trivia, mental health accessibility, filling up journals, and, of course, activism.

claudé (she/they)



**THANK YOU FOR
READING!**

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RESOURCES

- **Community Tool Box** – a database from the University of Kansas that provides step-by-step guidance on more than 300 community-building skills
- **Elevate Your Activism** – a living document that provides tools and resources to Smith students looking to make change on campus
- **Jandon Center for Community Engagement** – Smith College's hub for community-based learning and service. Located in the basement of Wright Hall. Join their newsletter to be notified of what opportunities the center provides
- **Zinn Education Project** – lessons, books, and films about organizing designed for students and teachers in middle school and high school



reach out to me at colson@smith.edu for questions & suggestions!

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