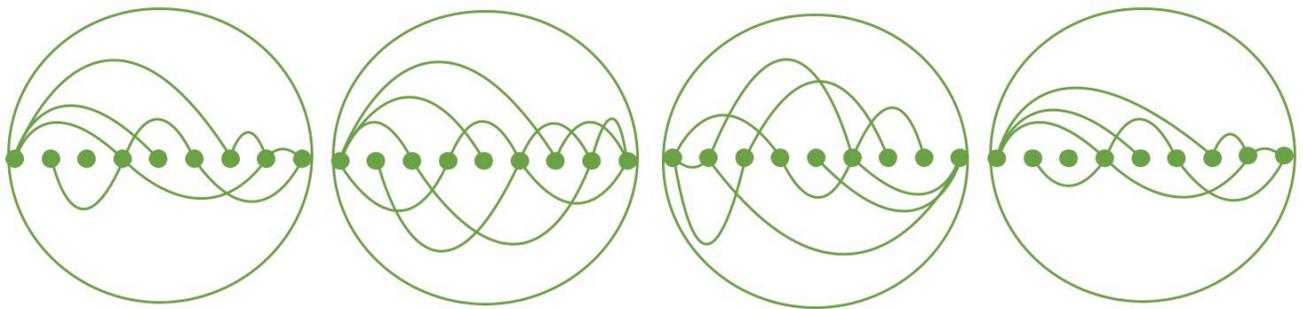


Organizers Talk About Organizing*



community learning partnership

Pathways into Community Change Careers

*Excerpted from “LISTENING—BUILDING—
MAKING CHANGE: JOB PROFILE OF A
COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

ORGANIZERS TALK ABOUT ORGANIZING:

LISTENING. BUILDING. MAKING CHANGE.

As part of developing a job profile of a community organizer, the Community Learning Partnership (CLP) held a focus group of organizers in New York City in October 2012. Their discussion of how, when and why organizers engage in particular tasks and use specific skills offers essential insight into their occupation.

The Association for Housing and Neighborhood Development (ANHD), a CLP partner organization, convened the two-hour discussion among six organizers. Ericka Stallings from ANHD facilitated the session. Joan Minieri from CLP also attended and took notes.

ORGANIZERS ARE SKILLED LISTENERS AND COMMUNICATORS

The participants reflected on the complexity of their tasks and were unanimous in portraying a good organizer as a skilled listener and communicator who can build relationships, and identify and develop leaders.

Ericka gave the participants the list of the top 20 most highly rated traits, skills and knowledge areas from the online survey of organizers that CLP had recently completed. She asked them to take a moment individually to review these lists and rank their top five. The top choices were those mentioned above: listening, relationship building, and identifying and developing leaders, followed by being culturally aware and able to ask for help.

The organizers agreed that listening is, as one stated, *“the most important building block.”* They cited the need for communication skills overall, in doing one-on-one meetings, facilitating group discussion, and effectively agitating people. Most critically, they believed that applying what they hear in their communications is what really matters. They said that organizers need to be able to make connections between what they hear from community members and see ways to apply it to the work. *“A lot of these fall under being able to connect, whether it is individually, or between people,”* one organizer said. *“That is one thing I am always thinking about – like bad heat in your apartment equals bad policy. I am always building that narrative with people.”*

ORGANIZERS BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Relationship building also appeared on nearly everyone's top-five list. "Organizing is about the strength of the relationships you build with other people," one affirmed. "It is about love, and seeing together the lives you want to build together." They cited the concept of accountability as being an essential aspect of relationship building. This includes being able to follow through and to guide people to practice and expect accountability in all of their relationships. They noted the importance of strong relationships and accountability with the organizer and with other organization members as well as with figures such as public officials and landlords.

ORGANIZERS ARE CULTURALLY AWARE AND OPEN TO CHANGE

In terms of cultural awareness, they explored the need for organizers to "understand where people are coming from" and to be able "to relate that to a culture, gender, class level." One organizer spoke of cultural awareness as part of the "integrity" of an organizer. Another suggested, "There is an inherent political analysis in that. The majority of what we want is systems change; at the same time we need to have an oppression analysis."

Being open to change includes the ability to reflect on and "change strategies, messages, approach" as one organizer said. Flexibility also includes "being intentional about where you want to focus your limited resources."

ORGANIZERS THINK CRITICALLY AND CONTEXTUALLY

The organizers also talked about the importance of critical thinking, and one added the need for contextually thinking. "Our work is not always revolutionary," this organizer suggested. It is also about a systematic analysis of what is possible, "breaking down a mayor's race and how it will affect our work, for example, understanding points of pressure and windows of opportunity, understanding the context."

ORGANIZERS ARE COMMITTED TO JUSTICE AND TO SELF-REFLECTION

The organizers highlighted the importance of having a dedication to social justice, and being open to self-reflection. They agreed that a commitment to social justice must be "core to who you are," at some level, as one framed it.

Self-reflection was a theme to which they repeatedly returned. One suggested self-reflection is a particularly important attribute and something for anyone considering a career in organizing to be aware of: "If I am not interested in looking at myself, maybe organizing is not the right career for me."

ORGANIZERS ARE INTENTIONAL AND TENACIOUS

In several different ways, they said that organizers need to be prepared to work hard — to be tenacious, to challenge themselves, to take initiative and to be always pushing themselves and community members to see the connections between personal experience and public policy.

“The basis of organizing is the intentionality behind it,” one said, naming the continual action/ reflection nature of creating change that the group referenced throughout the conversation.

ORGANIZERS LEARN BY DOING

While they explored the various duties and tasks involved in organizing, from strategy development through campaign planning and organization management, the organizers focused on the building block skills. They talked about the differences between what an organizer needs to bring into an organization, versus what they expected to need to teach over time. Some tasks, such as campaign development, they noted as being critical, but suggested that acquiring the ability to complete these tasks requires on the job learning.

Other tasks and related skills require more immediate mastery. For example, the organizers noted that that they expect to train new organizers to do leadership development, in ways that reflect how their organization defines leadership. At the same time, *“Identifying leaders is really hard for people,”* one experienced director asserted. *“It is something people need to have within six months to a year or you will not make it as an organizer.”*

While the building blocks the organizers kept returning to in the conversation were personal traits and basic skills that they expect to develop and strengthen in new organizers, they were clear that these needed to be there on some level if they were to hire or keep the organizer on staff. Their language was along the lines of ‘this is what I am looking for’ when talking to a potential staff person or evaluating a new organizer.

They also noted that what an organization needs is not always the same as what an individual organizer needs. Organizations, in a sense, need everything on the list, but people learn things at different points in their development, and not everyone can or should be expected to be good at everything.

ORGANIZERS DEVELOP LEADERS

In terms of other aspects of leadership identification and development, cited as a core task, *“I don’t want to blankly talk about leadership development,”* one organizer said. *“I think you can learn coaching, how to accompany a person in a process, where you both identify where you both want to end up.”*

For leadership development in particular, the organizers said that this is not only necessary for building a strong membership-led organization, but that it is part of an organizer being able to develop her/himself, and to acknowledge that no one person can 'do it all.'

ORGANIZING REDEFINES CULTURAL NORMS

The focus group participants acknowledged that being able to ask for help is essential. They linked it to self-reflection and to leadership development. One organizer said that asking for help *"is the self-awareness to just be willing to get better."*

This organizer noted that for new organizers, being able to ask for help is *"contrary to everything that they've learned."* This idea that the job of an organizer is in many ways, counter to experience in the dominant culture, was a thread that ran throughout the discussion. At the same time, the organizers cited the importance of basic skills that could apply to any workplace, such as being personally organized so that others could follow or take up another's tasks.

REFLECTING ON TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

Ericka asked the participants to consider the most low-rated traits, skills, and knowledge areas on the CLP survey. They focused on skills related to resource development and to technology.

They thought that development needs vary, to a large extent based on the size of the organization.

"In a big organization, organizers may not need development skills, but for a small organization, they may." They also again referenced the fact that what an organization needs is not necessarily what every organizer needs to be able to do.

The technology discussion touched on computer use in a specific way. *"Using a computer is pretty important, because keeping track of the membership through the data base is really important"* one organizer said. *"I don't know any group that doesn't use a data base."*

As for use of social media and video, both ranked at the bottom of the CLP survey responses. One said, *"It is incredibly important but we don't do a good job with it...they are important skills but our generation does not have the skills to know how to make this work. I know that the investment now will pay off, but I don't have that time to figure it out."* Another had more direct experience using technology tools and suggested *"showing the work through video, photos is a great way to pull people in."*

At the same time, they generally agreed that mastery of the tools is not as important as knowing your base, how people in your base communicate, and adjusting to accommodate that. One asked, *“What moves people and what’s going to be effective?”* As another put it, *“I can write an amazing two paragraph e-mail, but if no one in my base will read two paragraphs, so what?”*

Having the tools linked to strategy and the underlying skills was generally more important to these organizers. One said, *“I am on social media, so I get that,”* however *“it was not until someone came up with a strategy for how much, how many, and trying it, evaluating it,”* that

social media could be applied to the organization’s work. *“Learning how to craft a public message is more important than how do you make a flyer or write a tweet,”* this organizer concluded. *“If I can craft a good message, that’s the skill, how you send it out is less important.”*

Finally, in reviewing the survey lists, the organizers also added the skills of being able to handle conflict and having a critical pedagogy by helping people to learn by doing.

LEARNING TO BE AN ORGANIZER

Finally, the organizers reflected on how they learned their craft.

“It is relational,” one said about how organizers learn about organizing, *“and that is important.... having someone to process it with.”*

Another suggested, *“A lot of it is trial and error, and someone pointing out to you what you have just done.”* This organizer gave an example of getting a parent to stop cooking a meal you don’t like, and walking through the steps to do that successfully. *“You figure out how to do it, you get your sister involved, and you go through all the steps to get what you want, but you would not have known you ran a campaign unless someone told you it was a campaign.”*

Another agreed and said that training at ANHD in particular was critical. In learning to do a one-on-one meeting, the organizer reflected, *“I still remember the first time I was trained to do this and seeing it in a training context. I still go back to that. We had sessions here where we simulated things. Then a facilitator gave feedback on what happened, what did you notice? It was about having someone tell you what you actually did.”*

Another continued, *“When I started, I had some of the skills on this list, but I did not know what organizing really was.”* The organizer also recalled participating in training at ANHD. *“I used to think I knew what a one-on-one was then I came to*

training here and we learned organizing was about power relationships. I remember realizing that it was not about painting a mural together.”

After that initial training, the organizer cited developing relationships with more senior organizers as well as coaching relationships. *“I would take agitational challenges, media hooks, and things like that, and bring them to talk about.”* Later, the organizer would do the same with newer organizers, to continue the mentorship process.

“Having mentors and the opportunity to do things is how I learned,” another agreed.

Learning requires *“shadowing and being shadowed,”* one noted. *“Understanding that action and reflection is equally important. You have to be open to being watched.”*

The organizers concluded with expressions of enthusiasm for CLP’s efforts at the community college level, citing the availability of on campus organizing projects for practicing skills.

They agreed that mentorship; the opportunity to reflect on one’s actions with trusted individuals and as part of intentional, group training; and naming the process of making change as ‘organizing’ have all been essential to their development. They offered that these could be part of any educational endeavor.

“This is a great reminder of the complexity of what we do.” —Organizer from the New York focus group