

GUIDELINES FOR ORGANIZING

“Organizing” is a collection of techniques for a) forming a group whose purpose is to achieve some kind of social change; and b) managing the group through whatever steps are needed to achieve its purpose.

These guidelines are based on 30 years of organizing experience. Unfortunately, nothing can guarantee success in organizing; following the guidelines should, however, help you avoid the most serious pitfalls.

1. **Organize around a specific issue.** A group formed for some vague purpose, such as “to improve relations between parents and professionals” is much less likely to succeed than a group whose goal is “to double the number of medically fragile children receiving nursing and other essential medical services in their own home.”
2. **Make certain the organization’s purpose is clear.** David Belasco used to tell budding showmen, “if you can’t write the idea for your show on the back of my calling card, you don’t have a good idea.” Belasco was right: if you cannot describe the purpose of your group in a few words, you are in trouble.
3. **Start work on your issue at once.** Spend the absolute minimum amount of time on such trivia as fundraising, writing by-laws, choosing officers, etc.
4. **Avoid detailed planning.** Instead, watch for chances to capitalize on opportunities as they develop. Too much detailed planning produces overly rigid organizations that cannot respond quickly to changing situations or promising alternatives.
5. **Select your “strategies” (general ways to achieve your purpose) with great care.** “Strategy” is a fancy word for finding the best way to get the person you are trying to influence to make the right decision. Picking the right strategy will not necessarily ensure success, but it will certainly make your life easier. Choose strategies that suit your community, your target, and the members of your group.
6. **Find a role for everyone who wants to help.** Don’t worry about ideological purity; if someone is willing to help, put them to work.
7. **Match people to work.** There really are things that parents do better than professional, and that professionals do better than parents. Don’t be afraid to reflect this fact in the way you assign tasks within your group. But don’t put too much emphasis on roles; find and exploit what each person in the group does best.
8. **Let your leaders emerge from the group.** One reason for starting work before the structure of your group is set is to permit leaders to emerge from the actual work of the group.
9. **Don’t worry about how many people are active in the organization.** Do worry about whether the organization is achieving its purpose.
10. **All organizations need to be nurtured and supported.** Pay attention to the health of your organization. Make sure members feel that their work is appreciated.
11. **Don’t try to sustain an organization beyond its useful life.** When the job is done, consider getting rid of the organization. It is easier to rally people around a new organization with a new purpose than to sustain an old organization until the right issue comes along.

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