

HOW TO

Organize Strong Local Chapters

Building an effective, long term multi-issue grassroots community organization requires a systematic approach, which can take a variety of forms depending on the mission and vision that the membership wants to attain. This adaptability is consistent with the adage “form follows function,” which means that an organization first needs to be clear about its function (or mission), and then choose a form (or structure) to fulfill it.

The mission of grassroots, community organizations is to bring people together to have a real say in decisions that affect their lives and build power to promote and protect what they value. The ability to build and maintain strong, active, community-based chapters is essential to fulfilling this mission.

THE ORGANIZING PROCESS

What follows is one process for building new community-based chapters that organizers and leaders can use. Keep in mind that there is no one set organizing methodology, and the process described here can be modified to fit specific situations. The process for organizing new chapters has four distinct phases:

I. CREATE A STATEWIDE OR REGIONAL ORGANIZING PLAN

Before a commitment is made to explore the formation of a new local chapter in a specific community, it’s important to step back and analyze the big picture, which entails looking at the entire state or a specific region within the state. Questions to consider at this phase include, but are not limited to:

- Where does your organization currently have local chapters?
- Where might having new local chapters help you achieve your mission and vision?
- What’s your power analysis of your state or region, and where will new chapters help you build more power?

- What resources do you have to devote to new organizing? Who can lead a new organizing effort?
- How do you allocate your time, talent and dollars to new organizing that will have the greatest impact and build your organization?
- What constituencies or geographic areas are under represented in your organization that could be the focus of a new organizing drive?
- Have you received any requests from people for organizing assistance and what are the particulars?
- Does your organizing plan have the ownership and support of your leaders?

The result of this phase of the organizing process is a 3-5 year statewide or regional organizing plan that sets clear organizing priorities for your organization.

2. ASSESS A LOCAL COMMUNITY

Once a statewide organizing plan is in place, it’s time to assess a local community based on the priorities outlined in your statewide plan. For example, let’s say your organization has identified four counties for potential new organizing drives over the next three years in the following order of priority – Ada, Rosebud, Larimer and Brook. The logical choice is to start with an organizing assessment in Ada County unless, of course, you have the resources to do two or more assessments simultaneously.

During this phase of the organizing process, the lead organizer gathers basic information about the community and begins analyzing the power dynamics within it. The key is to see what can be, not simply what is. At a minimum, the organizer should gather basic information about the following*:

WHY ARE LOCAL CHAPTERS IMPORTANT?

Local chapters are important because: (1) people are naturally inclined to work together and organize in the places where they live; (2) people need a voice in decisions that affect their lives, and often the best place to maximize opportunities for participation is at the local level; and (3) we need a strong local base of members to change policies at the state, national and international level.

Turf: What are the natural boundaries of the potential organizing area? The community to be organized should be defined by the people who live there. A rural chapter may be countywide or even multi-county, whereas a big city may be able to sustain several neighborhood based chapters.

Demographics: Who lives in the area? Who are the potential constituencies and what are the implications for organizing? How has the population evolved over the years, and is it likely to change in the future?

Key institutions: What are the key institutions – local government bodies, schools, churches, large employers, colleges and universities, etc. – and how do they affect the community?

Community-based organizations and agencies: What community-based organizations – labor unions, senior citizens clubs, neighborhood associations, direct service agencies, etc. – operate in the community? Is there a need for a new grassroots community organization or not?

Powerful actors: Who are the movers and shakers in the public and private sector who wield power and influence? These people can be very public, or behind the scenes.

Existing issues: What issues are already emerging? Have any leaders stepped forward or groups been formed?

Potential issues: What problems exist that produce hardship, injustice, dissatisfaction or anger from which new issues can spring? The best organizers can spot future issues that have yet to bubble up to the surface.

Objective conditions and political trends: This is a broad category that looks at everything from neighborhood trends to the national political climate.

At this phase in the organizing process it may help to form an Organizing Team. An Organizing Team is a small group of senior staff and leaders who assist the lead organizer with problem solving and advice during an organizing assessment and drive. The lead organizer files weekly progress reports with the team. Team members provide advice and agree to spend time on the ground during the assessment and/or drive.

This phase of the organizing process culminates in a report to the organization's Board of Directors with a recommendation from the lead organizer regarding whether or not to move forward with an organizing drive and the formation of a new chapter.

3. DEVELOP AN ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

The Organizing Committee (OC) is a temporary committee of 12-15 people who provide the leadership and direction to kick off a new chapter. The OC gives visible legitimization to the organizing effort, actively recruits members, begins to define the first issue(s), and provides initial leadership.

*This list is adapted from *Roots to Power: A Manual of Grassroots Organizing* (Second Edition), by Lee Staples, Praeger Publishers, 2004.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT TOPICS

The following list of leadership development topics needs to be covered with the Organizing Committee before the public kick-off meeting. Topics are listed in a logical order that builds on one to the next. The first meeting should focus primarily on building relationships and trust among the Organizing Committee members and the lead organizer.

- Vision and values
- Why organize
- Building strong public relationships
- Role of members, leaders and paid staff in a grassroots group
- Membership recruitment and grassroots fundraising
- Healthy organizations
- Issue identification, campaign planning and taking action
- Leadership development
- How to run good meetings
- Working with the media
- Evaluations as a learning tool

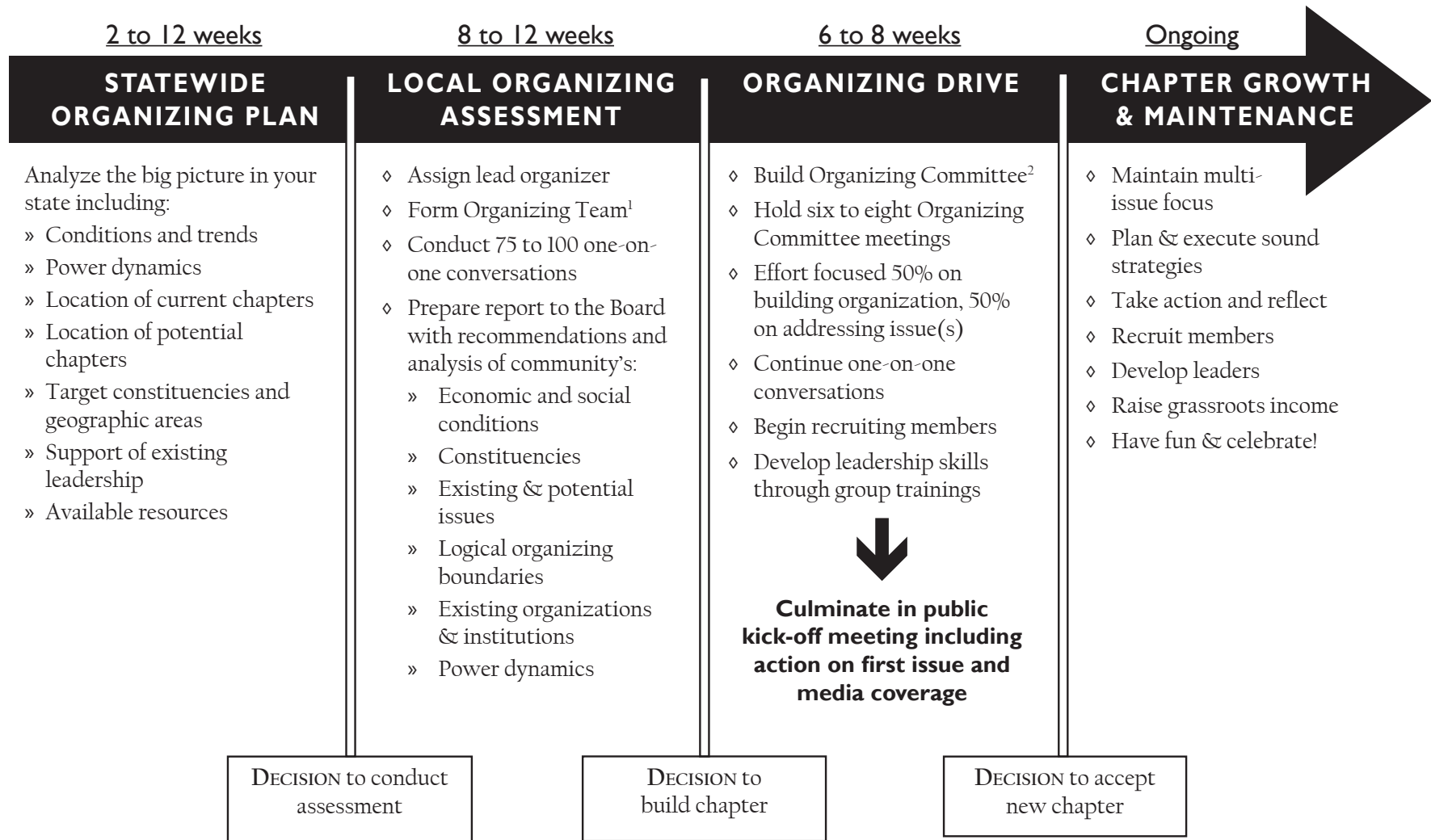
Organizing Committee members must make an informed choice to support the mission and vision of your organization, and also to the extent feasible represent the diversity of people who live in the community. They must also make a commitment to:

- Create a long term, multi-issue chapter,
- Foster and practice democratic values,
- Be public about their commitments,
- Uphold a common set of organizational standards,
- Provide contacts in the community, and
- Pay membership dues and participate in fundraising.

The best OC members are not glory hogs, or people with strong prejudices or personal agendas, but people who can motivate and inspire others, lead by example, keep their commitments, and who are able to work together with others to take action and change the world for the better (starting with their own community).

The organizer plays a major role identifying potential OC members through 1-on-1 conversations and then inviting specific individuals to join the committee. The organizer takes a very directive role at this stage of the organizing process.

BUILDING A NEW CHAPTER



1. Organizing Team: A small team – consisting of senior WORC staff and member group organizer(s) and leaders – who provide feedback and assistance to the lead organizer.

2. Organizing Committee: A temporary committee of 12-15 members who provide leadership and direction to kick-off a new group.

4. CONDUCT THE ORGANIZING DRIVE

Once the OC is finalized, the next phase in the organizing process is the organizing drive. The OC directs and coordinates this phase of the process working alongside and with the lead organizer.

This phase of the organizing process typically takes 6-8 weeks, and includes as many meetings of the OC as needed to get the work done. During the organizing drive an attempt is made to strike a balance between building the new chapter and addressing issues. The OC and lead organizer continue to conduct 1-on-1s with community members and recruit new members. Organizing Committee meetings are often held in people's homes, and meeting facilitation is shared so that everyone gets a chance to develop her/his leadership skills. Important decisions made by the OC include:

- Defining the role and responsibilities of the OC members and the organizer,
- Agreeing on a mission and vision, and writing bylaws,
- Determining the chapter's name,
- Nominating an initial team of leaders,
- Working out the chapter's structure (how decisions will be made, frequency of membership meetings, accountability mechanisms, etc.),
- Clarifying the chapter's relationship with the statewide organization (including rights and responsibilities),
- Picking a first issue, developing a winning strategy, and planning a first action or activity,
- Planning a kick-off event to launch the chapter (where, when, turnout plan, agenda, etc.), and
- Developing membership recruitment goals and a plan.

The organizing drive culminates in a public kick-off meeting that preferably includes action on the chapter's first issue and attracts media coverage. As the public kick-off meeting approaches it's important to set the agenda, assign roles, delegate tasks and intensify your turnout efforts. A dry run of the kick-off meeting is helpful, and includes planning for "what ifs." The four primary activities that take place at the kick-off meeting include:

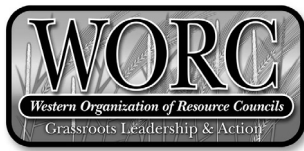
1. Ratification of the chapter's name and affiliation with the statewide organization.
2. Nomination and election of temporary officers (you want to avoid locking into untested and possibly ineffective leaders for a long time).
3. Presentation of first issue and action (it's also helpful to allow open discussion on other issues).
4. Membership pitch and collection of membership dues.

Kick-off meetings also commonly include a speaker or educational component, and time for socializing and networking.

Don't underestimate how much time the lead organizer needs to devote to the organizing process for it to go smoothly. The organizing drive phase of the process can easily consume 75% of an organizer's time, and the organizer's work load and responsibilities need to be adjusted accordingly.

Following the kick-off meeting the lead organizer and/or key leaders should visit or contact all those who intended to attend but did not. These follow-up visits should be conducted as soon after the kick-off meeting as possible to keep up the momentum.

Once the kick-off meeting is over, the new chapter moves into its growth and maintenance phase. All chapters experience highs and lows throughout their lives, but through it all the goals should remain the same: maintain a multi-issue focus, plan and execute sound strategies, recruit members and develop leaders, have some fun, and celebrate achievements.



WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 10,000 members and 45 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

WORC Member Groups:

Dakota Resource Council
Dakota Rural Action
Idaho Rural Council
Northern Plains Resource Council
Oregon Rural Action
Powder River Basin Resource Council
Western Colorado Congress

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FOR MORE ON LEADERSHIP:

Principles of Community Organizing training sessions are held once a year by WORC.
Advanced Community Organizing and Leadership training sessions are also held by WORC.

How to Run a Good Meeting and **How to Speak in Public** are other topics available in this series of guides to community organizing.

MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and win their issues.

Topics are listed on our website – www.worc.org. These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for \$2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.

