



# HOW TO Understand the Role of a Community Organizer

## THE ROLE OF A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

With a community organizer now in the White House, community organizing is recognized more than ever as an honorable profession. But what do community organizers do? The short answer is that they get people to work together to solve their own problems and change the world for the better.

Some liken the role of a community organizer to that of the coach of an athletic team, in that it is the organizer's job to get other people to take the lead. Others say that an organizer builds community with a purpose. Still others define an organizer as someone who "builds a group of people or institutions to address a common problem through collective action."

Here is a more detailed description of the role and responsibilities of a paid community organizer in a grassroots, membership based organization like those that make up WORC.

**Organizers build organizations that maximize the power and participation of their members.** Their role is to see that the people and structures are in place to create coherence and integrity within an organization. Organizers are responsible for expanding the membership base, maintaining a focus on action, and preserving democratic, participatory structures and processes.

**Organizers listen to their members,** who know the community, and let people go at their own pace while also helping them develop the self-confidence to try new things.

In community organizations, decision making is vested in the members. Big decisions should be made by as many members as possible. **Organizers are responsible for sharing information and raising questions, options, alternatives and problems that affect the collective power the group can wield.**

Organizers do their fair share of the work, while also striving never to do for others what they can do for themselves. In other words, **organizers work with, not for, their members.**

Empowered individuals speak for themselves. **Organizers identify and develop a diverse group of members who agree to serve as the organization's public voice on a variety of issues.**

**Organizers are attuned to the power relationships and political agendas surrounding an issue,** and analyze the social, political and economic forces that shape our communities, states, nation and world. **Organizers develop sound organizing strategies based on this power analysis.**



Community organizers work with their members to hold public officials accountable.

**Organizers recruit and develop leaders,** seek to discover the skills, talents and interests of current and potential leaders, and encourage shared leadership. They believe that everyone has the potential to lead if given the opportunity.

**An organizer's role is to build public relationships,** that is, relationships based on the general needs of civic and community life. The main tool for building such relationships is a face-to-face conversation (often called a one-on-one). The purposes of one-on-ones are to build relationships and trust, discover self-interests, identify skills and talents, and move people to involvement.



Community organizers meet with people one-to-one, in small meetings, and in lots of other settings. In the process, many people's lives are transformed.

**Another role of the organizer is to work with people to define problems and issues, and help them think through the strategies and tactics necessary to act with confidence and win.**

**Organizers recruit members, assist with fundraising, and integrate fundraising into every aspect of their organizing work.** Organizers try to build an organization that is not dependent on outside funds.

Community organizations are schools for civic participation and personal growth. Good organizers see the essence of their work as developing in local leaders the talents and gifts they have. **Organizers ensure that their members receive a consistently high standard of appropriate and effective training.**

One of the primary tools of organizers is an effective meeting. **Organizers enable the members to hold meetings that are productive and focused.**

**Organizers facilitate training and strategy sessions when needed** to help their members and leaders learn the skills they need to speak for the group, make good decisions and take the out-front roles. Organizers don't run meetings where members are making decisions.

Organizing is "on the job training," and evaluations are an important way we learn from our experiences. **Organizers build evaluations into all aspects of their work.**

Accountability means people can count on one another to keep commitments and agreements. **Organizers strive to be accountable and hold others accountable in every aspect of their job.** Organizers create a culture that

encourages people to commit only to things they can really do, and to know they are accountable for their actions.

Ninety percent of organizing is follow-up. Follow-up means both keeping in touch with people to get their jobs done, and planning for the fact that a few people won't be able to complete their tasks. **Organizers always make time for follow-up.**

**Organizers strive to reflect on and improve their skills on an ongoing basis, and develop an annual self-development plan.**

An organizer must be comfortable knowing that s/he will be in the background and that when recognition for her/his work comes, it's from the members and leaders of the organization for which that organizer works, not the press or the public. Many veteran organizers say that the respect of their members is a great reward and the reason why they stay in organizing.



Community organizers encourage people to participate in civic life and take public action, which is what democracy is all about.

# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

What does a typical day look like for a community organizer? Here are the tasks during one hypothetical, yet fairly realistic, day for a community organizer in the WORC network. Evening and weekend meetings are a common occurrence when working with volunteers, and a community organizer must learn how to balance the sometimes long hours with her/his personal well being.

## **8:30 A.M. PLAN YOUR DAY**

You check your work plan and calendar to make sure you don't miss any appointments, meetings or other commitments scheduled for that day. You may need to call to confirm key appointments.

## **9:00 A.M. DEVELOP LEADERS**

You conduct a one-on-one for the third time in two months with Betty Jones, a community resident and leader in a local chapter of your organization, at her house. You spent previous meetings with Betty establishing trust and discussing her motivations for volunteering her time to support locally owned businesses. You spend this time making a distinction between promoting conscious purchasing decisions (such as a "buy local" project) and changing governmental policies that favor corporate chain stores. You share examples of how organized people have come together and shifted political power. She agrees to attend a future training event on community organizing.

## **10:30 A.M. RESEARCH THE ISSUE**

Together with three leaders from the chapter, you meet with a representative of a group of local businessmen to discuss possible solutions to the loss of independent businesses in the community. Your leaders met earlier to prepare and they run the meeting with minimal assistance from you. They probe the representative on what public policies will favor locally owned businesses and who the relevant decision makers are.

## **12:00 P.M. STRATEGIZE TO WIN CHANGE**

You grab lunch with the three leaders to evaluate the meeting, discuss what you learned, determine what more information needs to be gathered, and decide who will report back to the committee that is responsible for formulating a campaign to advance public policies favoring locally owned businesses. The committee will present its recommendations, including specific policy solutions, to the members of the chapter for their approval at the next monthly membership meeting. Once ratified by the members, the solutions will be presented to the City Council at an action your organization will hold in the near future.

## **1:30 P.M. BUILD A BASE**

You meet one-on-one with a local business owner, Joe Smith, at his bookstore for the first time. You spend most of the time listening and asking questions. He shares his vision for a vibrant downtown. You also learn that he is reluctant to publicly criticize the re-zoning of a residential parcel on the outskirts of the city to accommodate a new Barnes and Noble bookstore because he is afraid that he will lose customers. You conclude with an agreement to meet again in a week for more conversation.

## **2:30 P.M. CHALLENGE PEOPLE TO ACT**

You meet for a second time with Mary Erickson, a school teacher and member of Hillcrest Congregational Church. Mary's pastor is active in your organization and is encouraging her to get involved. Previously, Mary shared her frustration that the school district buys all its books and supplies from out of state vendors. You challenge Mary to put her anger into action by joining the local chapter and participating in the campaign committee. She writes you a membership check on the spot.

## **3:30 P.M. TRAIN LEADERS**

You meet with the four officers of the chapter to plan an agenda for the next monthly membership meeting, including how to best handle the campaign committee's report and recommendations.

## **4:30 P.M. REFLECT AND LEARN**

You sit down at the office with other staff to reflect on your recent experiences and determine upcoming priorities for the chapter and the campaign to support locally owned businesses.

## **7:00 P.M. COORDINATE AND SCHEDULE**

You call members from your home in the evening (several of whom hold 9-5 jobs) to coordinate and schedule an upcoming meeting of the campaign committee to be held prior to and in preparation for the chapter's monthly membership meeting.

# ENABLING MEMBERS AND LEADERS TO BE SPOKESPEOPLE

One of the greatest challenges for a community organizer is working with members and leaders to be the public voice of the organization. This task is doubly difficult because of the societal pressures to rely on professional spokespersons – lawyers, paid activists, policy analysts and other experts. This does not mean that paid staff or other experts retained by a grassroots, community organization do not occasionally get quoted in the media or delegated the job of spokesperson, but that should be the exception and not the rule.

A community organizer continuously strives to help members and leaders understand why they can and should be the primary spokespersons for the organization. The why boils down to one basic reason: the messenger is just as important as the message. Having members serve as spokespeople puts a human face on an issue and their personal stories can convey things in a way that other spokespersons cannot.

For example, if a paid staff person says to a reporter, “These gas wells are threatening people’s homes and health,” it differs considerably from a member saying, “I’m afraid to drink my water because there is a gas well 300 feet from my house and they’re putting toxic chemicals down the well.”

Once members and leaders understand that they can and should be spokespersons, the organizer’s next job is to help them succeed by following these four basic steps.

1. Make sure every spokesperson has a copy of and understands the talking points or message on an issue. In many grassroots, community organizations members also help develop this material.

2. Train people on the message and how to stay on it and prep them to anticipate reporters’ questions. Practice beforehand by conducting a role play, or by putting them on videotape and evaluating their performance. The more practice your spokespersons get, the better they become.



Community organizers enable their members to serve as the organization's public voice.

3. To build a spokesperson’s confidence, put them in nonthreatening situations first. For example, you may ask a member to provide a quote for a news release or meet with an editorial board before testifying in front of a hostile legislative committee or speaking at a press conference or media event.

4. Finally, an organizer needs the patience and discipline to connect his or her members up with reporters. For starters, prepare a list of spokespersons on your issues and provide it to reporters. You need to know how to locate your spokespeople to set up an interview and often make the arrangements. It’s OK to provide background information to reporters, but leave the quotes to members. Most reporters appreciate a real person anecdote combined with background from staff.

Asking members and leaders to be the public voice of our organizations may cause some logistical problems, but presents a truer image of who we are, and is more effective in the long run.



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 ORGANIZING:

**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](http://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.

