An introduction to community organising
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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.

And who will join this standing up and the ones who stood without sweet company will sing and sing back into the mountains and if necessary even under the sea we are the ones we have been waiting for

June Jordan
Poem for south African Women written in celebration of the 50,000 women who on August 9, 1956 defied the apartheid pass laws in a protest in Pretoria

Margaret Mead
Welcome to Hackney Unites’ introduction to community organising. We have been using these approaches at a small scale in Hackney for about 10 years, and we felt it was time to share some of the ideas. Whether you are concerned about affordable housing, climate change, racism and other forms of bigotry and oppression, secure employment that offers a living wage, or access to education, the ideas in this booklet will help you strategise how to achieve your goal.

This guide is aimed at people who want to use community organising techniques to win gains for their communities. We will discuss what a community is later, but for now let us assume that you have identified a community aspiration that sufficient people care about and are prepared to do something to achieve. Many guides to community organising are written for professional community organisers, people who are employed to organise a community. This guide is aimed at people who are part of their community and who want to break down barriers and mistrust and to create a culture within their community where people take action together to improve the lives of everyone within their community.

Of course, it would be a lot easier (but probably not as effective) if every community could simply employ an experienced community organiser to come into their community and get them organised. Unfortunately, there are too many disadvantaged and excluded communities, and too few grant making bodies prepared to invest in community organising to make that a viable model for change. Fortunately, the key to good community organising is to recognise and unlock the enormous potential that already exists within our communities.

Where will the changes we need come from?

They will come from us, and from people like us (as well as people who are not necessarily that like us) who care enough to take the time to explore the techniques and strategies that have been used successfully in the past to effect change. We live in a ‘passive democracy’ where we periodically elect representatives to represent us, but almost invariably they are candidates from established or emerging political parties who are expected to prioritise party loyalty (and their own career) ahead of the interests of their constituents. The result is that there is a great deal of cynicism about politics, and even democracy itself. However, when people get involved in shaping the future of their communities, by collectively defining their aspirations, by strategising how to effect change, and by engaging with ‘the powers that be’, they not only win gains for their community, they also enrich democracy. That is an exciting prospect.

We are the ones …

Community organising fundamentally aims to empower the disempowered. To allow the marginalised and silenced to find an effective voice. However, it differs significantly from alternative strategies of empowerment. For a start it has the golden rule: ‘don’t do for others what they can do for themselves’. However, this golden rule raises a question: what exactly can the disempowered do for themselves? And a range of subsequent questions such as ‘how do the disempowered come together, overcome their disempowerment (and often artificial divisions) and build collective power?’ In other words, what is the role of the organiser (by its very nature a role that suggests it is distinct from the community), and what relationship do they have with the community?

People who have been systematically disempowered by their lived experience, may find their own collective voice independently, and there are many examples of communities where that has happened: from slave revolts to spontaneous strikes and protests. The women’s march on Pretoria in 1956 was an example of a mass mobilisation by women facing further restrictions from the hated apartheid government. Tellingly they sang a song written specifically for the protest with the refrain, which declared that women had entered the arena of mass politics: Wathint’Abafazi Wathint’imbokodo! (Now you have touched the women, you have struck a rock.).

It was this that June Jordan celebrated with her poem which concludes: ‘we are the ones we have been waiting for’ a phrase that has sums up the ethos of organising from the perspective of the unorganised.
What follows is designed to be an introduction to the concepts of community organising, it is not meant to be a blueprint, or a set of rules, nor does it suggest that there is always a ‘right way’ and a ‘wrong way’ of organising: merely an approach that when applied, can increase the prospects of success.

This booklet is designed to introduce you to concepts and approaches, and then to encourages you to use your existing knowledge and experience to reflect upon whether these concepts and approaches would help you achieve your goals. While we definitely do not have all the answers, we believe that there are some very helpful questions you might want to ask before you start, and as your group or campaign evolves.

This is an introduction, but once you have begun exploring these techniques, you will immediately begin to create your own way of organising; learning from what works in your context, and with your community.
Hackney Unites grew out of an initiative by the local Trades Union Council – a body that co-ordinates trade union activity in a local area. Responding to a wave of racism and the threat of a racist organisation Hackney TUC began to work with community and faith groups. We built a strong coalition, and when the immediate threat had passed, we all recognised that we had created something too good to simply drop once the initial threat had passed.

The original steering group had peace campaigners, party political activists (from across the political spectrum), environmentalists, trades unionists, feminists, activists from within ethnic minority communities and people of faith. Initially we were worried that these diverse backgrounds would lead to conflict and obstruct our working relationships. However, the opposite was true, there was a creative energy as we learned from each other and adapted tactics from different traditions and applied them to new circumstances.

We soon realised that while inventing new things was a lot of fun, we did not have to learn everything by trial and error. We realised that many groups, including the Chartists of the 19th century, the unemployed workers movement in the 1930s, the shop stewards’ movement of the 1950s, the feminists of the 1970s, the African American Civil rights movement, the Eastern European democracy movements and many more, had already struggled with the big questions: how do you organise people to challenge, or hold to account, those who have power?

It is in America that the ideas of Community Organising have been most refined, so we have no shame in thanking the Americans who have helped us develop our approach. Over the years we have benefited from the advice and support of great organisers such as Janice Fine, Arnie Graff, Marshall Gantz, Jane McAlevey and Carlos Saavedra.

But before we go any further let’s honour a woman who history has largely overlooked, but whose contribution to the African American civil rights movement, and to the practice of community organising is unparalleled. Miss Ella Baker (as all but her closest friends referred to her).
The principles of community organising have been long established and practiced around the world, but before we look at modern examples, let's honour a specific community organiser whose name is virtually unknown, but who pioneered many of these techniques. Ella Josephine Baker (1903 –1986) was an African-American civil rights activist. She was principally a movement organiser rather than a public spokesperson and her organising spanned over five decades. To the people she worked with and organised she was always Miss Baker, but without any disrespect to her, we will simply refer to her by her surname in this article.

Baker stated:

‘You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organisation might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders.'

She worked alongside some of the most famous civil rights leaders of the 20th century, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr. She also mentored many emerging activists such as Diane Nash, Stokely Carmichael, Rosa Parks, and Bob Moses. She was a critic of professionalised, charismatic leadership and a promoter of grassroots organising. Despite being virtually unknown outside the movement, she is credited as being one of the most important African American leaders of the twentieth century and perhaps the most influential woman in the civil rights movement.

Early life and career

Baker was born in Norfolk, Virginia, and raised by Georgiana and Blake Baker, her parents. When she was seven, her family moved to her mother's hometown of Littleton in rural North Carolina. As a girl, Baker listened to her grandmother tell stories about slave revolts. Baker's grandmother had been enslaved and was whipped for refusing to marry a man chosen for her by the slave master. Baker attended Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, graduating in 1927 at the age of 24. As a student she challenged school policies that she thought were unfair. After graduating, she moved to New York City. During 1929-1930 she was an editorial staff member of the American West Indian News, going on to take the position of editorial assistant at the Negro National News (‘negro’ was the term used by the black community at that time). In 1930 George Schuyler, founded the Young Negroes' Cooperative League (YNCL), which sought to develop black economic power through collective planning. Having befriended Schuyler, Baker joined in 1931 and soon became the group's national director. She was committed to economic justice for all people and once said, 'People cannot be free until there is enough work in this land to give everybody a job.'

She also worked for the Worker's Education Project of the Works Progress Administration, where she taught courses in consumer education, labour history and African history. Baker immersed herself in the cultural and political milieu of Harlem in the 1930s. She protested against Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and supported the campaign to free the Scottsboro defendants in Alabama, a group of young black men falsely accused of rape.

She also founded the Negro History Club at the Harlem Library and regularly attended lectures and meetings at the YWCA. During this time, she lived with and married her college sweetheart, T. J. (Bob) Roberts. During her time in Harlem she befriended the future scholar and activist John Henrik Clarke and the future writer and civil rights lawyer Pauli Murray, and many others who would become lifelong friends.

The Harlem Renaissance greatly influenced Baker in her thoughts and her teachings. She advocated for widespread, local action as a means of change. Her emphasis on a grassroots approach to the struggle for equal rights influenced the success of the modern Civil Rights Movement.
NAACP (1938–1953)

In 1938 Baker began her long association with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In December 1940 she joined the staff as a secretary. She was appointed director of branches in 1943, making her the highest-ranking woman in the organisation. She believed that the work of the branches was the life-blood of the NAACP. She spent approximately five months every year travelling throughout the, at that time, wholly segregated, South, recruiting members, raising money, and organising local branches. She pushed the organisation to decentralise its leadership structure and to aid its membership in delivering more activist campaigns at a local level.

Baker despised elitism and placed her confidence in the many rather than the few. She believed that the bedrock of any social change organisation is not the eloquence or credentials of its top leaders, but rather, in the commitment and hard work of the rank and file membership and, equally, the extent to which those members engage in a process of discussion, debate, and decision making. She stressed the importance of young people and women in the movement.

On her annual organising drives throughout the southern states of the USA on behalf of the NAACP, Baker met hundreds of black people and established lasting, enduring relationships with them. She slept in their homes, ate at their tables, spoke in their churches, and earned their trust. She wrote thank-you notes and expressed her gratitude to the people she met. This personalized approach to political work was one important aspect of Baker's effort to recruit more members, men and women, into the NAACP. Her work solidified a remarkable network of people across the South, many of whom would provide the organisational infrastructure for the emerging civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas some organisers tended to talk down to rural southerners, Baker's ability to treat everyone with respect helped her in her recruiting. At that time she saw her major objective as 'getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence.'

Between 1944 and 1946, Baker directed regional leadership conferences in several major cities such as Chicago and Atlanta. She got top officials to deliver lectures, offer welcoming remarks, and conduct workshops.

In 1946 she returned to New York City to care for her niece. She joined the New York branch of the NAACP and became its president in 1952. She moved the branch's office from downtown up to Harlem and built an array of coalitions to work on issues such as school reforms, police brutality and desegregation. She resigned in 1953 to run unsuccessfully for the New York City Council on the Liberal Party ticket.

In the summer of 1957 she organised the New York Parents in Action for Quality Education committee, which among other things, wanted to challenge de facto segregation in New York schools and change the attitude of the educational establishment to the black community. She later lamented that these efforts had not delivered many concrete outcomes, but in 1970 she reflected:

...Out of it came increased fervor on the part of the black communities to make some changes. One of the gratifying things to me is the fact that even as late as this year I have met people who were in that group and who have been continuously active in the struggle for quality education in the black communities ever since.


In January 1957, Baker met with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levinson to discuss how to create a continuing movement following the success of the Montgomery bus boycott. This meeting eventually led to the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This was initially planned to be a loosely structured coalition linking church based leaders in civil rights struggles across the South.

The group wanted to emphasize nonviolence as a means of bringing about social progress and racial justice for southern black communities. The organisation would rely on the southern black churches for the base of its support. The strength of the organisation rested on the political activities of its local church affiliates.

It envisioned itself as the political arm of the black churches. As the first staff member hired for SCLC, it was Baker who tried to ensure that the new organisation had the capacity to plan and implement action. She was concerned that as a 'church led' movement it would be led by the male preachers. She was concerned at the lack of opportunity for women to develop into leadership positions, and did not always trust some of the clergy. She also feared that the organisation would develop in a way which would see Martin Luther King reacting to events rather than shaping them.

The SCLC's first action was the 1957 Prayer and Pilgrimage for Freedom. Baker was instrumental in pulling off this large-scale and extremely successful event. In doing so, she demonstrated her ability to straddle organisational barriers, deliberately ignoring and minimising rivalries and irrelevant battles. SCLC's next project was the Crusade for Citizenship, a voter registration campaign. Baker worked closely with southern civil rights activists in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi and was highly respected for her organising abilities. She helped initiate voter registration campaigns and identify other local grievances, often working with colleagues from her days as a NACCP organiser. She remained in Atlanta for two and a half years as interim executive director of the SCLC.

Baker was fully aware of, but not intimidated by, those men with whom she worked who undervalued the advice of women and sometimes resented her role. She made no special effort to be ingratiating. She worked at SCLC as she had at the NAACP, to raise money, conduct voter registration drives, speak to citizens groups (sometimes ten times a day), and travel to community after community to help people help themselves.

Baker and Martin Luther King differed in opinion and organising philosophy. Martin Luther King once claimed: 'leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but it invariably descends from the pulpit to the pew.' Baker believed the opposite. That real leadership could only come from below. She once claimed that the 'movement...
made Martin, and not Martin the movement’. In another speech she made, she urged activists to take control of the movement themselves, rather than rely on a leader with ‘heavy feet of clay’, this was widely interpreted as a criticism of King.

She went on to warn against SCLC becoming ‘a cult of personality’ for Dr King rather than a means of empowering others, and she eventually left SCLC after deciding that movement building was more important than the specific organisation and personalities involved. Having spent many years organising in the South at a time when the Klan was terrorising black communities, she also had real reservations about King’s commitment to non-violent. While she never advocated violence as a political tool, she certainly believed in the right to self-defence and said so publicly.

Participatory democracy

Baker regularly insisted that; ‘strong people don’t need strong leaders’, and criticised the notion of a single charismatic leader at the helm of movements for social change. Baker’s ideas would later be referred to as ‘participatory democracy’, and this is characterised by leadership development amongst the widest layers of supporters, she wanted each person to get involved individually. She also argued that the ‘people under the heel’, referring to the most oppressed sectors of any community, ‘had to be the ones to decide what action they were going to take to get from under their oppression).

Participatory democracy involved an enriching of the traditional appeal of democracy with a call for active citizenship and broader participation. There were three primary emphases to this new movement:

- An appeal for grass roots involvement of people throughout society, not just as activists but also as theorists: making their own decisions.
- The minimisation of bureaucratic hierarchy and the associated emphasis on expertise and professionalism as a basis for leadership.
- A call for direct action as an answer to fear, isolation, and intellectual detachment.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1960–1966)

On February 1, 1960, four students from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University sat down at the lunch counter inside the Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina. The men, later known as the Greensboro Four, were refused service from the segregated lunch counter. They ‘sat in’ until the store closed and the next day more than 20 students joined them. By day four there were 300 students sitting in. Within a week students all over the South were organising sit in protests to desegregate lunch counters. The Civil Rights movement was entering a new phase.

In April 1960, Baker persuaded the SCLC to invite some 200 students who had been arrested for engaging in sit-
in protests to a meeting at Shaw University. This was an opportunity for sit-in leaders to meet one another and assess their struggles and explore the possibilities for future actions. At this meeting the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC; pronounced ‘snick’) was formed.

Baker had been consistently critical of the style of leadership of Martin Luther King. As well as her opposition to the concept of messianic leadership, she implicitly challenged how the civil rights movement had since the formation of SCLC adopted the very gendered organisation structures of the Black Church, which at the time, had a largely female membership but an almost exclusively male leadership.

‘I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means he has been touted through the public media, which means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don’t do the work of actually organising people.’

In the young people of SNCC Baker saw the potential for a more collaborative style of leadership that could revitalize the Black freedom movement. Baker wanted to bring the sit-in participants together in a way that would sustain the momentum of their actions, equip them with necessary skills, provide resources that were needed, and also help them to coalesce into a new young and dynamic leadership force for the movement. SNCC would rapidly become the most active organisation in the South and it was considerably more open to women leaders.

Following the conference Baker resigned from the SCLC and began a long relationship with SNCC. Along with Howard Zinn, Baker was one of SNCC’s highly revered ‘adult advisors’, affectionately called the ‘Godmother of SNCC’. In 1961, at their founding conference, Baker helped the young organisation avoid a damaging split when she persuaded SNCC to form two wings: one wing for direct action and the second wing for voter registration. Baker believed that any voter registration activity would be met with such violence that it would have to morph into a direct action campaign, and she was soon proved correct.

It was with Baker’s help that SNCC (along with Congress of Racial Equality) coordinated the region-wide freedom rides of 1961 and began to work closely with black sharecroppers and others throughout the South.

She was a teacher and mentor to the young people of SNCC, highly influencing the thinking of such important figures as Julian Bond, Diane Nash, Stokely Carmichael, Curtis Muhammad, Bob Moses, and Bernice Johnson Reagon (later of a cappella ensemble: Sweet Honey in the Rock).

Through SNCC, Baker’s ideas of group-centred leadership and the need for radical democratic social change spread throughout the student movements of the 1960s. Her ideas influenced the philosophy of participatory democracy put forth by Students for a Democratic Society, the major anti-war group of the day. These ideas also influenced a wide range of radical and progressive groups that would form in the 1960s and 1970s and became central to the Women’s Liberation Movement. The organising of SNCC was perhaps amongst the highest example of community organising throughout the civil rights movement. In her biography of Baker, Barbara Ransby details how the young organisers operated.

‘When SNCC members went into small towns and cities throughout the South, for example, they first paid their respects to the clergy and to others who might cast themselves as the leaders and representatives of the Black community. But then the activists knocked on doors in the most run-down parts of town and in the most remote and impoverished rural areas. Gradually these doors creaked open. The activists sat down with individuals who had little formal education and asked them to analyse the situation around them and help shape the agenda for change. This was a major departure both in substance and in style, from the practices of national and regional groups…Baker understood however that small town communities were often polarised by class even as they were united by Jim Crow segregation. She had learned by experience that using local elites as conduits to the masses could actually backfire, lessening the credibility of outside organisers who were trying to gain access to particular communities.’ (Ransby, page 279)
In stark contrast to both NACCP and SCLC the SNCC came to rely on the rural poor.

Although SNCC was initially welcomed by the local black middle class – the people with education, reputations and clout – as the struggle intensified that support quickly evaporated... During the course of the campaign... SNCC intuitively grasped a vital part of its future mission in Mississippi developing a sense of worth and leadership among people who had never been held in high regard in their communities.

The SNCC organisers shook hands with sharecroppers who had dirt under their fingernails and sat at the feet of workers with dust on their boots. They sat on the perches of ramshackle tenant houses not only to teach but also to learn. Their attitude, like Baker's, was based on the understanding that expertise and wisdom could emanate from outside a formally educated cadre of leaders. According to one SNCC activist, Baker taught the young people in the movement who had achieved some level of formal education that they were no smarter, and certainly no better, than the uneducated farmers and workers in the communities where they were organising.

Barbara Jones (Omolade) a black SNCC worker from New York City, saw in Baker an example of how educated black organisers should comport themselves. 'There was no room for talking down to anyone,' she recalled. 'There was never the expressed attitude that a person who was illiterate had something less to offer.' Rather, Baker set a tone that said, 'There was no room for talking down to anyone.'

This was not just a philosophical position but led to specific tactics of organising:

'Of the nearly two dozen local projects that SNCC initiated in Mississippi during the early 1960s the movement in the Delta community of Greenwood perhaps best reflected the spirit of organising that Ella Baker advocated. Here in what would become SNCC's state headquarters, lucrative cotton plantations were thriving while white vigilantes carried out ruthless repression. In the summer of 1962, young Sam Block... arrived on the scene and began the tedious process of meeting people, building relationships, trying to identify local militants, and earning people's trust through his dogged perseverance, thus following Baker's edict that activists meet people where they are. Block walked the streets and met local people. He not only talked to people about SNCC, voting rights, segregation: he also listened to the locals talk about their fears, concerns and aspirations. Eventually, he asked people to come together in small meetings at the Elks Hall where at first all they did was sing freedom songs. He gradually introduced political topics to the discussion. The project was slow to gain momentum, but after a while Greenwood would produce some of SNCC's most talented and hard working local organisers, such as Laura McGhee and June Johnson. Julian Bond, a SNCC leader, described Sam Block's organising style as essentially the formula for SNCC's day to day work: 'SNCC organisers spent their first weeks in a new community meeting local leadership formulating with them an action plan for more aggressive registration efforts and recruiting new activists through informal conversation, painstaking house-to-house canvassing and regular mass meetings.' (Ransby, 307)

**Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party**

In 1964 along with Fannie Lou Hamer, Baker helped organise the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). At the time the Democratic Party in the South (disparagingly referred to as the 'Dixiecrats') was a strong advocate for racial segregation. It also often opposed the pro-civil rights leadership of the national party. MFDP was a direct challenge to the 'Dixiecrats'. They organised a state-wide convention, where 2,500 people debated how to displace the official Democratic Party. Baker was the keynote speaker at the state convention. She did not deliver the kind of populist address that many would have expected on the importance of voting and winning rights but made a statement about the obligations of the audience:

'I'm not trying to make you feel good. We have to know what we are dealing with and we can't deal with things just because we feel we ought to have our rights. We have to deal with them on the basis of knowledge that we gain...through sending our children through certain kinds of courses, through sitting down and reading at night instead of spending our time at the television and radio just listening to what's on. But we must spend our time reading some of things that help us to understand this South we live in.'

In the run up to the 1964, Democratic Party's national convention in Atlantic City, Baker worked as the coordinator of the Washington office of the MFDP and accompanied a delegation of the MFDP to the convention. The group's aim was to challenge the national party to affirm the rights of African Americans to participate in party elections in the South. When MFDP delegates challenged the pro-segregationist, all-white official delegation, a major conflict ensued. In a fudge, the Democratic Party initially referred the challenge to the Convention Credentials Committee. The MFDP delegates lobbied and argued their case, and large groups of supporters and volunteers established an around-the-clock picket line on the Boardwalk just outside the convention, which garnered considerable publicity.

The Credentials Committee proceedings were televised, which allowed the nation to see and hear the testimony of the MFDP delegates, particularly the testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer, who gave a moving and evocative portrayal of her hard brutalized life as a sharecropper on a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta and the retaliation inflicted on her for trying to register to vote. The MFDP delegation were refused conference credentials after many Southern delegates threatened to walk out in support of the Mississippi Dixiecrats. In a clumsy and ill considered 'compromise' the MFDP delegation of 64 were offered a token recognition of just two seats. In a response that was aimed squarely at reassuring their supporters back home, Fannie Lou Hamer explained: 'We didn't come all this way for no two seats, 'cause all of us is tired.'

The MFDP left the Convention rather than compromise. However, they kept up their agitation throughout the Convention. When all but three of the regular Mississippi delegates left because they refused to support the party's presidential candidate, the MFDP delegates borrowed passes from sympathetic northern delegates and took the seats vacated by the Mississippi delegates, only to be removed by
the party’s officials. While nominally their objectives had not been met, they gained national coverage and their activity forced a rule change banning the seating of delegations chosen in racially segregated elections. This rule change would eventually break the hold of the southern Dixiecrats.

**Final years**

In the 1970s Baker returned to New York, where she continued her activism. She later collaborated with Arthur Kinoy and others to form the Mass Party Organising Committee, a socialist organisation. In 1972 she travelled the country in support of the ‘Free Angela’ campaign demanding the release of Angela Davis. She lent her voice to the Puerto Rican independence movement, spoke out against apartheid in South Africa and allied herself with a number of women’s groups, including the Third World Women’s Alliance and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. In a 1970 interview she is quoted as saying:

‘I thought of myself as an individual with a certain amount of sense of the need of people to participate in the movement. I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people. Every time I see a young person who has come through the system to a stage where he could profit from the system and identify with it, but who identifies more with the struggle of black people who have not had his chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel a new life as a result of it.’

Her influence was reflected in the nickname she acquired: ‘Fundi,’ a Swahili word meaning a person who teaches a craft to the next generation. Baker continued to be a respected and influential leader in the fight for human and civil rights until her death on December 13, 1986, her 83rd birthday. The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights is named after Baker, and they assert that:

‘Like her, we spark change by unlocking the power of every person. We believe the best way to honour Ms. Baker’s legacy is to inspire people to imagine new possibilities, lead with solutions, and engage communities to drive positive change.'
Chapter 4:

More recent stories from the front line

Few of us can begin with the aspiration of matching the commitment and scale of organising that characterised the life of Ella Baker, but we all have to start somewhere, so here are a couple of examples, on a smaller scale of community organising.

Organising in Shoreditch

I started to work as a community organiser for Hackney Unites in 2015. So, you might be thinking... a community organiser? What sort of job is that? Well, yes, I am a community organiser. And this is a common reaction I receive when I describe my role. So let me describe what a community organiser is. Community organisers are people who believe in the power of communities to organise to achieve the changes they need for their communities, their local areas, and in turn their lives. Community organisers facilitate the strategic, and healthy interaction of people within communities. Hopes, dreams, memories, community, friendship and love are some of the values that community organisers cherish and help to uncover from the hidden and forgotten trunks of our communities.

An example of the work we do is reflected in a piece of work I started in Hoxton last year. Hackney is experiencing a rapid gentrification process, which has dramatically changed the demographics of the area in recent years, with Hackney one of the 3 most deprived areas in London according to the Department of Communities and Local Government. Families and friends are being evicted and pushed away to areas outside London every day, with the segregation of black and brown communities increasing at the same speed. This is not a phenomenon peculiar to Hackney, but a painful reality for working class Londoners and other residents across this city. But this is not bad news for all. It is excellent news for those who benefit from a system that silences communities and destroys our social fabrics in its pursuit of profit.

Getting started

When I started to organise in Hoxton, I was on my own, I do not live in Hackney and I knew no-one. But I was sure a listening campaign would help me overcome these barriers. A listening campaign is a tool used in community organising to get to know people in the community, identify the concerns people have, meet people who are hoping to do something about those concerns and engage others. More than this, listening campaigns help us to break away from the invisible barriers that prevent us from connecting and dreaming together.

I went door knocking first on my own and then with some community members I met along the way. When we started to talk to people, most shared that they have been living in the area for many years and that they did not know each other. They felt that everyone was too busy and that people were suspicious of each other. Most people did not believe that any changes could be achieved in their local area, and did not feel empowered to do anything.

At the same time, most people also spent over 35 minutes talking to us, sharing their views, stories and their dreams. It was very inspiring to see them shifting their mind-sets from ‘We can’t do anything’ to…‘If we worked together, we could do much more...' Every time we run listening campaigns, we find the same answers and the same spirit, people are willing to speak and are ready to trust and work together again. One problem that occurs too often amongst people who want to see change is that we are too busy looking inward, trying to convince, strategise and educate ourselves rather than looking outwards. When we do this we may well be missing out on the very people we have been looking for, who are willing to come together to knit the social fabric we need to meet the challenges we face.
People power and the real radical changes we need to see

We talked to almost 20 residents from 3 of the local estates. We then organised a community picnic, which was very poorly attended, but our first attempt to bring the community together, and then other meetings at the local pub and even along the corridors of one of the estates until people realised that we were not going away and decided to join.

I recently saw Tracey, one of the residents and new leaders from Hoxton. I was so happy to see her, as I have now gone to organise elsewhere in Hackney. She told me about their plans for this year, their achievements which range from getting their heating and water system to work again after years of individual complaints that had not lead to any solutions, to improvements to the common areas around the estates. Tracey also mentioned that they had formed a support group, which is now holding the council accountable by asking to provide the budget for their area. They have many more plans and are having a get together to celebrate their achievements, one of them being the rebirth of the local community fabric.

This story started by a listening campaign, a very simple tool that can be used by anyone anywhere. The local residents have achieved tangible improvements to celebrate, but their biggest achievement is their future potential, and the feeling that people are now connected and aware of one another’s needs, as well as their common challenges.

This community in Hoxton might face an eviction process as part of the redevelopment of their estate, or their condition might worsen in the future, but they will never be the same isolated people again, they share a similar dream and know that are part of a community or practice.
My name is George and I spent three years working as a full-time community organiser for a public transport trade union. I wanted to help empower communities suffering the brunt of decisions made from the top down – to close staffed ticket offices, or to hike up rail fares. Time and again, as I worked with communities across the country, I wondered how to make good community organising ideas as useful as possible for those who needed them the most. And time and again, I was reminded of the enormous benefits of building power from the grassroots up.

The need for communities to get organised and win greater power over their lives is clear. In recent years, community organising ideas have won considerable interest from those fighting the impact of government cuts, racism and poverty in neighbourhoods across Britain. Its influence can be seen in high-profile campaigns against local hospital closures and against supermarkets eating up small high street groceries. Our approach recognised that public transport, though not perhaps as widely felt as the planned closure of the local Accident and Emergency, or as sharply felt as disgraceful housing conditions, is nonetheless a quality of life issue. It matters for millions of people that their public transport system is safe and affordable. Many of us rely on the railway and the buses to get to work, school or college, to see friends and family and stay connected. In rural areas, bus networks are the only way in which many people can remain socially engaged. Without them, loneliness and isolation can set in.

My first move was often to seek out those already working around these issues. At first I was surprised by how much this fresh approach challenged local community figures, many of whom had been active for years. As many of them freely admitted, they had got themselves into a rut. They had perhaps become an effective conduit between public transport users and local government, but they had lost the ability to organise and galvanise public opinion, and therefore many times could not point to any recent wins. Some of them were the sole remaining activist in a local transport group. I tried to ensure that my initial conversations with these people would lead them to reconsider their activity. Community organising, with its emphasis on measurable wins, with educating people and facilitating their ability to act, with thinking strategically about campaign objectives was a set of new ideas. Not everyone received them well. But for those that did, it was genuinely rewarding to see them take up these concepts and begin to think about using them for the benefit of local public transport users.

In Hackney, commuters and bus users were keen to embrace these ideas and try something new. Many locals could still remember the dark days when the overground...
railway was synonymous with unreliability and its stations very unsafe places to have to wait around for the next train, especially at night. I encountered more than a few horror stories at the well-attended public meetings we held in neighbourhoods across the borough. Now a government-commissioned report was raising the prospect that unstaffed stations would again become the norm, and understandably there was concern.

Not only was the issue we had identified in Hackney one which resonated with the community, but from the start we made sure our ethos was different. It surprised people who had been in community campaigns before. In our public meetings, we spent time getting to know everyone who had gone to the trouble of coming along. We heard their stories, their worries and their hopes for the future. We eschewed ‘speakers’ from the front – notable local dignitaries and so on – as much as we could, and emphasised people’s own experiences and ideas instead. We asked for pledges of support from people in the room, and asked what skills and connections people could offer – and how they would like to grow as people through their engagement with this issue. I saw it catch people’s imagination.

In Peterborough, I adopted a different tack at first. I didn’t know the city at all, but I could see that it was a fertile ground for greater campaigning on public transport issues. It was within commutable distance to London, meaning many frequent train travellers would be paying thousands of pounds in season ticket fares just for the privilege of getting to and from work. And I knew subsidies for vital local bus services had shrivelled in the face of centrally dictated spending cuts.

I started by mapping what organisations and individuals might be interested in this vision, and I had a series of rewarding one-to-one conversations where I found out more about the city and its transport problems. Although I had an initial approach that sought to coalition-build, I was also interested in the capacity for new leadership. This came together on one of my last times in Peterborough, when I worked with the local bus users’ group to host a priority-setting and learning event where more than fifty local bus users and other interested parties showed up. It was great to see the local interest groups that I had built links with – the pensioners’ association, the trades council and others – working together with people who had never set foot in a campaign meeting before.

Looking back on these and other experiences during my time organising communities against public sector cuts, I am struck by a couple of key observations. The first is the transformative power of learning. I spent many hours designing training programmes and materials, tailoring them for public transport issues and activists, arranging the logistics and leading training sessions. I didn’t regret a second of it, it all felt valuable. I focused on drawing out the fundamentals of relational organising: the necessity of conducting one-to-ones, building trust and leading teams. We would also cover skills around how to map communities, analyse where power lay and how power could be built to win on issues. Running these sessions was also hugely educational for me, seeing what worked and what didn’t, what people wanted to learn and what wasn’t essential. And learning new skills and new insights from other participants gave those in the room the confidence and know-how to become powerful leaders for change in their communities. It also helps to fulfil one of the main requirements for any community organiser – to leave something sustainable and meaningful behind when or if it becomes time to move on.

Which brings us to the second observation I’d like to make: the importance of identifying, supporting and nurturing new leaders. All community organisers know that it’s a myth that leadership is some rare, semi-mystical quality. This myth is that only a select few can be good leaders. Isn’t it strange how often these leaders resemble those who already have power?! The truth is that the ability to lead can come from all quarters. Anybody can have it – if they are given the skills and knowledge to turn their abilities into a meaningful contribution for their communities. And I learnt to look for leadership in the traditionally unexpected places. The person at the meeting who spoke the most, who delivered the most fiery rhetoric: well, those people are valuable, but they aren’t in fact the best leaders. The first questions I asked myself were: who has brought a friend with them to this meeting? Who has been out on the doors, speaking to people, or has sacrificed something important to be at this meeting tonight?

This approach helped me to zone in on the best community leaders out there: the unusual suspects. These are the people with the credibility to win their neighbours to a cause. They often have the real-life experience of the issue that means that they won’t walk away when they get bored, or when things get tough. They are the leaders to find and look after. And I do mean look after: it’s not often heard in the world of campaigning and organising, but it’s high time we start properly caring for those around us in these struggles. That means learning to spot when they’re going through a tough time mentally, and offering support.

One more thing: since these and other experiences of organising communities against public transport cuts, I’ve thought a lot about how the principles of community organising can be successfully applied to other efforts to bring about change. Too many of us – myself included – have at times fallen into a tired model of campaigning – when what we should be doing is organising. What do I mean by that? I see so many campaigns out there that:

- Tell people what to think – they don’t start from the basis that those most affected have the most knowledge about an issue.
- Tell people what to do about it – and don’t give people the chance to find their own solutions.
- Rely on just a couple of tried and tested tactics – rather than explore the exciting responses that communities themselves lead when given the chance.

Sometimes, these top down campaigns are necessary. Most of the time, I think they are not only unnecessary but harmful. They deny the opportunities to build new, grassroots leaderships, they block innovative tactics that resonate with working class people and they assume they know the solutions. They can be very disempowering. I’m not saying every campaigner should become a community organiser. But I do believe that by refocusing efforts to bring about change on bottom-up leadership, the power of working class communities and education, we might begin to see some of the change we desperately need in this country.
Chapter 5:

**Theory of Change (part one)**

In this chapter we begin to explore the key questions in organising a community.

How to make change happen

If you want to make change happen, then you really do need to start by ensuring you have an answer to a few quite simple questions.

**What do you want to achieve?**

It may seem like a strange question, but what exactly do you want to achieve? Spending some time early on discovering what the hopes and aspirations of your group are is time well spent. Very often people determine what they are against, rather than what they want to achieve. Too often people react against a proposed change, like the trade union that, when it heard the company wanted to centralise all its core functions, moving offices to one central location, came out strongly in favour of de-centralisation. They lost that argument and a year later the company changed its mind and decided to regionalise their structure. The union came out strongly against regionalisation (which was just de-centralisation by another name).

If that union had stopped to think, it would have said: we are not really pro or anti centralisation: what concerns us is the impact it has on our members: will they be forced to move house, or travel long distances to a new work location, or even lose their jobs. They could, instead, have said: ‘we are in favour of our members enjoying both job security and a decent work-life balance. The real issue for us is not centralisation or decentralisation, but the impact that any change will have on our members.’

Saul Alinsky, often considered an early practitioner and theorist of community organising in his book Rules for Radicals claimed ‘The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative’. In other words, knowing what you are against is not good enough, you also need to know what it is that you are for. Sometimes you will also have to have a discussion about whether you are for an achievable short-term objective or merely a long-term aspiration. Achievable short-term objectives can often involve compromise, but sticking with articulating long-term aspirations can make you seem irrelevant to the hear and now.

That is why it is important to have these discussions early, and in all honesty, they can be challenging discussion: because what we want, is not always achievable.

**Confidence leads to bigger aspirations**

Sometimes our objectives change: people who are mobilised, initially because of a perceived threat to their neighbourhood, can very quickly begin to value the sense of community that has been created in response to the initial external threat. In such circumstances, people can begin to say; we want to live in a community that has a say in what happens in our neighbourhood, rather than just have to put up with whatever is dumped on us.

At other times, organisations actually forget why they really exist. The routines of meetings become the purpose of the organisation and no-one expects or even tries to make a difference. Of course, if you asked people in these organisations what the purpose was, they would all have a great answer, but if you look at what they actually do, it sometimes bears no relation to their lofty aims.

Perhaps before going any further, you should sit down with a pen and write out what you think your organisation/campaign is about, what it aims to achieve (what ‘success looks like’). Later you may want to ask others in your group to do the same, and then compare your ideas.

**Considering your strategy**

Many people faced with a threat start to ‘agitate’ and ‘mobilise’, but before acting it is always worth considering a strategy, sometimes called a ‘theory of change’. In short a theory of change is a summary of what you think needs to happen before you can win the change you want. Here again, there are some key questions for you to consider:

- Who has the power to change the decision we object to?
- What do they want/fear?
- Who has influence over the decision maker, and what do they want/fear?
- Who are our people?
- How do we develop our leadership?
If people within your organisation or movement aren’t in agreement about a theory of change, it is very difficult to come up with a winning strategy and carry it out in a unified way. So let’s look at some of the constituents of a theory of change:

Who has the power to change the decision we object to?

Sometimes this will be obvious, the school governors have decided to close the after school club. You can get a list of them, and move onto the second question, but sometimes the answer will be more complex, there could be a whole series of people whose decisions collectively create the circumstance you don’t want to continue. However, it is very important you know exactly who your ‘target’ is. Because you need to analyse them and what motivates them. If you don’t know who has to change their mind then how can you create a strategy to deliver change?

What do they want/fear?

What are the motivators acting upon the decision maker? If they are an elected politician, then it may be a complex mix of wishing to get re-elected, following their political ideology (or party line), and a degree of personal values. If they are a big business, then very often they will be concerned about their ‘bottom line’, but they may well fear that the profit from a project is outweighed by the negative publicity if it is going to adversely affect the environment within which their business operates. Barclays Bank, was once know pejoratively as ‘the Bank of Apartheid’, because of its links with the Apartheid era South African, but when a world-wide boycott campaign began to emerge, they ditched the short term profit of Apartheid and re-invented themselves to the extent that Apartheid supporters began to refer to them as ‘the bank of the ANC’. A great example of moving a ‘player’ from opponent to supporter.

Bureaucrats, may be motivated by many things including hoping to keep their workload down to manageable levels, a belief in the values of the career they have pursued, or fear of being challenged and made to look foolish. What is important to understand is that different politicians, businesses and bureaucrats will be motivated to varying degrees by different values, and fearful of different outcomes. So you need to know your decision maker as a human, their history, their interests, and their aspirations.

Who has influence over the decision maker, and what do they want/fear?

Once you have mapped the motivations of the main decision maker, you may want to think about who has influence
over them. For example, a political leader may care about what local faith leaders think, they may care about what the local newspaper editor thinks, and they may care about what their backbenchers think (or they may not). Once you have identified the ‘key influencers’, you may want to see if you can get them to use their influence to sway the decision maker. For example, if a group of backbenchers visit the local council leader and say, privately, we really don't support your decision, we want you to find a way to change, it can have a substantial influence, quite possibly more than if a 1,000 people were to protest outside the town hall. The question then becomes: how do you get those with influence to assert it in a way that supports your objectives?

Who are our people?

You may want to organise women in a particular area, migrant workers, people on an estate, young people or any combination of these or other categories. But it is important that you begin with a definition of the community you want to organise. It may well be that over time this definition changes, but unless you have a working definition, you won't know if you are moving towards your target.

For our purposes a community consciously shares values or common self-interest. A potential community is one where people experience common issues, and would be better able to address those issues by working together. They become a community when they recognise that. As individuals, we are often members of multiple communities: there may be a community in our workplace (or in our profession), a community where we live, a community related to our age, sexuality, gender or ethnicity.

Communities are always contested, and in the process of re-definition. So for example, you may want to organise people who live on a run-down estate with the objective of getting investment into the estate. There will be a range of people who live there. Some will be people who have lived on the state for many years and will tell you how good it was when it was built, others will have moved in when it was already run-down. It is not unusual for some of the older residents to blame the newcomers for the problems. Sometimes, this will have an element of truth in it (often unnecessary divisions within a prospective community will have some element of factual basis). There may be ethnic divisions on the estate. There may be homophobia directed at some tenants. There may be drug dealing on the estate.

The people who live on the estate are a potential community, however, within this potential community there are a multitude of ‘identities’ which may divide the community. The people on the estate won't become a community until they start to describe their problems collectively and use the term ‘we’, until they start seeing each other, despite their differences, as potential allies in achieving their aspirations.

The question for an organiser is ‘what is the definition of this community’. An estate might appear to be an easy definition: it is everyone who lives on the estate. But there may be people who have different views. Should it be every tenant on the estate (i.e. those people who pay rent to the Council, or housing association), what about those people who have bought their flat, or those who are renting from a buy to let landlord? What about squatters? What about the drug dealers?

Every time we define a community, we define, not just who is inside it, but also who is outside it. This is an important principle to understand, and if you accidentally define a community in a way that is exclusive, you may well a) reinforce prejudices that make it harder for people to recognise their common interests, b) exclude those who are already disadvantaged and excluded, and c) lose potential allies.

Does your group include: people of faith, members of ethnic minority communities? Are women, and young people fairly represented? What about disabled people?

Of course it is possible that you only want to represent a section of your community, but if you make that choice, consciously or unconsciously, don't expect the excluded sections to be rallying to your support!

Once you have identified your community, your people, then you need to establish where their power lies. In the African American civil rights movement, the Montgomery Bus boycott was a perfect example of identifying how to unify people and exercise their power. During the year of the boycott, people cheerfully walked many miles to work. They were cheerful because they saw so many others doing the same, they were exercising collective power by refusing to hand over their money to a bus company that refused to treat them with dignity, and it was a good feeling.

So where does currently untapped power lie in your community?

Perhaps now would be a good time to think about this question and share your ideas with others in your group?

How do we recognise and develop leaders?

Leadership is a complex thing, and we are often encouraged to imagine ‘leaders’ to be great figures like Churchill, Stalin, Obama, etc. At a local level you will find many kinds of leadership. But there is a difference between occupying a position of leadership, and acting as a leader. On an estate you will often find a tenants’ association, but if you want to really find out who the leaders on an estate you need to ask people a simple question. If you had to leave your child with someone responsible on the estate, who would you call? The person they suggest may not be on a committee, but they will be someone whose opinions influence others.

Equally, if you attend a community meeting you may find a lot of people raising their voices and furiously denouncing the landlord. They may even get whoops and cheers when they do so, but often the person who is a real leader will speak quietly, and everyone will hush to hear what they have to say.

A leader is someone who cares about their community, and whose views are respected, listened to, and acted upon by that community. In every community there will be natural leaders, people who have never been trained, but who somehow have developed the skill to influence others. Often these people don't even recognise themselves as leaders, and often they don't know what it is that they do. A process of leadership development involves people reflecting on how they influence others, and most importantly how they develop leadership skills in others.
I
ternal and external relationship within a group are often something that evolves, but by thinking about the culture you want in your group and the way it chooses to relate to others, you can increase your chances of success.

Internal group cultures

Internal group cultures reflect the values and beliefs that guide what we do and, just as importantly, how we do it. Almost always, culture is implicit, meaning that no one tells us what the norms are – we just pick up on them by observing other people, how they relate to each other and to us. An organisation might have explicit policies or rules, but these policies might not reflect the culture, the day-to-day interactions within it.

An organisation that has little money, or other access to power and privilege within society but which wants to effect positive change, needs to have a culture that is open and inclusive: put simply, it needs to make everyone feel welcome and to value their contribution. More than anything, it should feel fun and productive to be involved.

There are examples of movements or organisations whose culture has diminished over time, so that its actions and norms no longer reflect its original aspirations. Before long, it no longer has the ability to organise for external change and people (even paid up members) no longer want to contribute their time and energy to an organisation that ‘used to have a great feel about it’ but no longer does.

A culture is likely to remain healthier and survive setbacks if it is explicit, where people know what the organisation’s values and belief are because people express them reinforcing the norms, rather than allowing bad practice to become the new norm.

Perhaps you should now consider what are the core values of your organisation? Discussing this with others in the group may lead to a high degree of agreement (which would be great) or a high level of disagreement (well you might as well know now!).

Your group’s DNA

It has been suggested that like living organisms, social justice groups and movements have a DNA (DNA is the molecule that carries genetic instructions used in the growth, development, functioning and reproduction of living organisms). According to this theory a group’s DNA has 3 main components: story, strategy, and structure. Together, these components determine the potential of a movement, including its culture. They inform how people relate to each other, how they understand the meaning and purpose of the organisation (its story), how they are going to take action and win (strategy), and how they are going to grow and make decisions (structure).

Arguably every organisation has DNA, whether we are aware of it or not; and each organisation therefore has a culture, regardless of how intentional or explicit it is. One organisation with explicit DNA is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). As soon as people join AA, they are introduced to the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions. These principles guide how people relate to each other, laying the foundation for the organisation’s culture. This explicit DNA has allowed AA to build a unified culture while becoming the largest recovery community in the world.

Movement Ecology

Whatever your group is trying to achieve, there is no doubt that others outside of your group will share at least some of your ambitions. This is the larger ecosystem we’re part of. Beyond our organisations, there are many campaigns, movements, cultures, communities, and institutions that are trying to make positive change in their own ways (equally there will be people who are seeking to preserve the status quo, or even put change into reverse). If you are a tenants association, you will have connections, formal or informal with a range of organisations; a wider tenants’ movement, but also political, social and community groups operating on your estate.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we are alone in seeking to make change, rather than being integrally
connected to a network of change makers with diverse
approaches to creating change.

The concept of movement ecology is useful not only for
appreciating different ‘theories of change’ (there may be
other groups who share your goals, but differ significantly in
how to achieve them) but also for explicitly acknowledging
our own strategic approach to creating change.

Some ingredients of differing theories of change (some of
which are inter-related) are outlined below.

**Personal transformation**

This theory of change believes that when we are hurt and
suffering, we are more likely to inflict hurt and suffering
on the people around us; conversely, when we heal these
hurts and take a step toward personal liberation, wellness,
or enlightenment, we are more capable of healing and
supporting those around us. In this theory, ‘the personal is
political’ is central.

**Alternative institutions**

Alternative institutions create change by experimenting with
alternative ways of doing and being in the world: time banks,
worker cooperatives, communes are some examples. All of
these push the boundaries of what is possible within our
social landscape.

Alternative institutions provide the opportunity for us to
relate to each other in a way that is aligned with our deepest
values, instead of values limited by the options of the status
quo.

Part of this theory of change is that successful experiments
not only foster the wellbeing of those who participate
in them, but in some cases they prove the success of
innovations and thereby lead the way toward broader
changes in society.

Marshall Ganz refers to this process as ‘power with’, in the
sense that we can make positive things happen without first
building power.

A great example of this working is the Rochdale Pioneers,
the founders of what became the co-operative movement.

**Dominant institutional reform**

This theory assumes that change can best be effected by
reforming dominant institutions such as governments and
corporations. Because of their size and power, when they
change, it can change life more significantly and for more
people than by other means.

This change can be effected by consumer boycotts, academic
research demonstrating the value of change, voting out the
existing government, or simply creating a sense that the old
ways must change because the vast majority of people are no
longer willing to accept them.

But it takes a lot of power to make a big institution change
direction.

**Transactional organising**

This theory, largely accepts the status quo, the existing power
balance, but suggests that if we get our communities better
organised, then we will be able to more effectively bargain
for with decision makers. In other words, while the big
picture does not change significantly, communities can win
small, but significant, improvements in their lives; simply
by becoming better able to ‘play’ the existing game, by the
existing rules.

**Transformational organising**

This theory asserts that when people get organised, they
become different people, and the society they live in
becomes different, it moves to different rhythms and obeys
different rules. The very process of creating well organised
communities so fundamentally shifts the balance of power
that those in power feel the need to behave differently, even
before a formal demand is made of them.

**A word of warning**

These are all descriptive theories, and as with every set of
classifications, they are only of use if we use them to order
our observations of what actually happens in the world
around us. These theories will lead us astray, if we rely on
them to the extent that we ignore the reality of the world
and instead try to force it to conform with the theoretical
categories.

Many individuals and some groups will combine some or all
of these approaches. For example, in the 1970s, the feminist
movement, while campaigning for free universal child
care also created self-help crèches. Many women who got
involved because of the practical support, went on to become
among the most determined campaigners. Black radicals
in the USA campaigned against police violence, but also
organised ‘breakfast programmes’ for children.

Marshall Ganz distinguishes between ‘power over’ and
‘power with’, one of the keys to successful community
organising is to build ‘power with’ to be able to exert ‘power
over’.
Chapter 7:  

Theory of Change (part two)

Sometimes it is easier to illustrate rather than explain, so here is a story about how Hackney Unites won a key battle back in 2008.

Why having a ‘theory of change’ helps you win

In 2008, a series of events took place that gave birth to the organisation Hackney Unites. It was a time when racism was on the ascendancy, and in response, Hackney TUC (a formal network of local trades union representatives) initiated a community response that included publishing a statement as an advert in the local paper.

The advert included public endorsements by the North London Muslim Community Centre, Hackney Muslim-Jewish forum, the Borough’s Deans’ group (leaders of the Christian community in Hackney) the Muslim Council of Britain, Operation Black Vote, Caribbean Labour Solidarity, Halkevi centre, and Day-Mer. It was personally endorsed by Ministers at the Newington Green Unitarian Church, St Lukes’ Homerton, Clapton Park Methodist Church, the chair of the North London Muslim Community Centre, and a prominent local Rabbi, Herschel Gluck, Chair of Hackney Muslim-Jewish Forum.

This was a diverse group reflecting much of Hackney’s communities, it was also the first tentative steps of the local trades council to engage fully with the community.

The challenge

Then we heard that the local paper had accepted an advert for a racist organisation and that the advert was to run the following week. It is hard to describe the level of fear and anger this created. Hackney is amongst the most ethnically diverse boroughs in the country, and one that had suffered terribly from racist gangs in the past, from Oswald Mosely’s blackshirts, in the 1930s and 1950s, to the skinhead gangs of the National Front in the 1970s. There was less than a week to prevent this inflammatory advert being published, and this was an issue that was ‘widely felt and deeply felt’. We knew that if the emerging coalition was to command any respect in the Borough then we would need to show that we were able to prevent this advert being run.

The debate

There were a range of suggestions as to how to stop the paper running the advert.

- A petition (it was recognised that with just a week to organise, this would take too long and was unlikely to be effective),
- A protest (unfortunately, the decision was being made 100 miles away and it would be hard to transport sufficient people there, and again it could be ignored)
- A strike by the newspaper workers (but the law requires that you give a weeks notice before you even ballot, let alone take action, so no time)
- A consumer boycott (again not enough time to make it happen)
- Asking advertisers to show their support to the community by withdrawing advertising. (great idea, but we did not have the connections to effect this in less than a week)
The analysis

Finally, we recognised what had been staring us in the face. A simple power analysis was all that was needed. Looking at the ‘supply chain’ it was obvious that even if we could not persuade the publishers, we had sufficient power, if we were to mobilise it, to stop the paper. The ‘gatekeepers’ who could stop the papers were the newsagents, and in Hackney, like many other inner city boroughs, the vast majority of newsagents were from ethnic minority communities. They would not need convincing of why we wanted to keep a toxic gang of racists from recruiting in our borough.

Our theory of change was very simple: if we got sufficient newsagents to fax (this was 2008, people still used fax machines) a letter to the publisher stating, ‘if you run the racists’ advert, then I won’t stock your paper’, the publisher would change their decision.

The plan

We then utilised another key element of community organising. We recognised that going into a newsagent who you had never met and having this discussion would be less productive than going into your own newsagent where you already had a relationship.

We mobilised our people in our network to approach the newsagent that they already bought their papers from. This was not a great ‘ask’ of everyone (they did not even have to go out of their way to do it), and their existing relationship with their newsagent meant they would get a hearing. We produced an address to the newsagent asking them to complete a pro-forma on the back and fax it to the paper’s publisher. It said, if you do print the advert for the racist organisation, then please cancel my order for your paper, and was signed by the newsagent.

The campaign launched with just four days until the paper went to print, but across the borough, dozens of people went into their newsagent and we believe that up to 100 newsagents faxed the cancellation letter to the publishers. The campaign was also accompanied by an appeal to residents to email their objections to the publishers.

Conclusion

As you might expect, the advert was not published in Hackney (although it ran in 11 other London papers owned by the same publisher). The publisher issued a statement:

Our decision on whether to publish or not is based on the nature of the local community. Our editors have to balance the need to be consistent in our approach with a desire not to damage the community in which they operate, a process which has been made more difficult by a clearly orchestrated campaign of complaints.

We have concluded that it is not in the best interests of the community to publish the advertisement in the Hackney Gazette.

The community in Hackney was rightly proud of the fact that it was ‘the nature of the local community’ that stopped the publication as well as our ‘clearly orchestrated campaign’.

We could have launched a petition, called a public boycott, or urged the workforce to strike, but none of those tactics would have had the effect that was achieved following a proper power analysis. In the aftermath of this campaign a decision was made to launch Hackney Unites as a permanent coalition for social justice, working with trade unions and the community (including faith groups). Hackney TUC later disaffiliated from the group that it had helped create (but that is a whole another story).
We all know of occasions when powerful movements have changed the world: the abolition of slavery, the winning of voting rights for women, the African American Civil Rights movement, the fall of South African apartheid. But how did they get to the point that they were able to move from moral protesting at injustice to having sufficient power to effect change? We are usually taught that change came about because enlightened leaders made new laws. In fact, history shows that these leaders tend to follow the will of the people, and sometimes reluctantly. Perhaps the best example of this is the former South African President, FW de Klerk. For most of his political career he was a staunch supporter of Apartheid, but in 1989, he recognised that Apartheid could not be sustained, and he began the process of its dismantlement: he was eventually awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. Another example is the peace process in Northern Ireland. Who would have predicted ten years previously, that Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein and Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionists, would sit down and work together to bring peace to the province? All of these leaders recognised that the old ways had to end and proved capable (to varying degrees) of assisting the transition to the new.

Martin Luther King once praised the United Auto Workers, and drew inspiration from them, because he said, they had made the most powerful company in the world at that time, General Motors, ‘say yes, when they wanted to say no’

Effective leaders understand that the power associated with their position is subject to change, and when change happens, the limits of their aspirations change. If their power diminishes, they will negotiate concessions, if it increases they will press for more advantage. So the question becomes, how can we increase our power, and how can we decrease the power of the decision makers we are confronting?

Too often faced with decisions that adversely affect our community, we either wearily submit, or else merely object in an ineffective way. How many times have you seen a petition, or a protest and thought: ‘good on them, but it won't make any difference’?

The first thing to do is to analyse the sources of their power, and consider how it can be disrupted. A powerful politician will exercise power related to their office, but whether they keep their office will depend on how they negotiate a range of power relationships, both with external players: opinion formers and the electorate and internal power blocs within their own party.

Negotiating is a process where we indicate to a decision maker, how we can reward them for making a decision we support, and alternatively, the ‘price’ of ignoring our representations. Of course skilled politicians will have taken steps to ensure they can ‘weather’ some bad publicity and the odd protest. This is why creativity in tactics is so important. It is when we stop playing the expected role, and cease to adopt the ritualised, and anticipated tactics of ‘opposition’, when we choose to play by different rules, that we can actively disrupt the power relations relied on by a decision maker, and thereby create the circumstances in which we can create meaningful change.

These principles can be seen in national and international movements, but they are equally true in relation to small local issues. An employer seeking to change working practice will expect their employees to grumble, some to resign, and even the prospect of a ‘token’ strike. These are all seen as part of the cost of making unwelcome change.
But if people genuinely refuse to co-operate with the change, and it appears that this refusal to co-operate is getting stronger and more imaginative, rather than weaker over time, then the employer will reconsider their plans.

Equally, a local authority may undertake a ‘consultation’ process about unwelcome changes on a housing estate. They may expect this to generate a lot of ill-feeling, that there will be a minority of tenants who will attend a noisy protest, and everyone else to grumble, but not act strategically. However, if the overwhelming majority of tenants participate in a collective action and are discussing ever more imaginative steps to bring pressure to bear on the housing authority, then it is possible that the proposals will be quietly shelved.

Of course both of these examples are ‘defensive struggles’ where you are trying to keep what you already have. It is often more challenging to win some new benefit, whether that is in the workplace or in the community. Which is why we have to think about how we build power.

Two major and distinct strands have evolved, cooperated, and clashed throughout struggles for social justice. These are: structure-based organising and mass protest. Of course these theories tend to look at national issues but the same principles can apply on a local level. If you are trying to prevent the closure of a much needed local service, you can create a local climate where there will be a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ if local politicians do not speak and more importantly act in support.

Structure based organising

Connected to the traditions of trade unions, Ella Baker, and Saul Alinsky, structure based organising builds power and resources through long-term organisation, develops leadership through one to one relationships and committee building, and believes that campaigns are won primarily through leverage over primary and secondary targets.

Moments of mass mobilisations

Conversely, the various ‘moments of the whirlwind’ that have emerged (the lunch counter sit-ins of the African American civil rights movement, and the Poll Tax campaign of non-payment which is perhaps the most successful in recent British history) are best understood through the paradigm of mass participation, in a series of escalating action that creates a crises for the decision maker.

Synergy

These organising traditions are of course often intertwined: either because both traditions are present within one organisation, or because there are separate organisations operating within the same ‘movement ecology’. For example, Ella Baker believed in methodical organisation building, but that organisation provided an infrastructure to support the student sit-in movement that subsequently erupted spontaneously and gave birth to the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC). Martin Luther King was a ‘charismatic leader’, but his leadership, calling on thousands if not hundreds of thousands into mass action was always built on a process of well-prepared agitation and organisation.

Perhaps it is best to think of organisations as fitting on a spectrum of whether they are structure based, or mobilisation...
Questions

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each model?
- Where would you put your own organisation on this spectrum?

The hybrid model

“I have been in many countries in this time after failure of a mass protest. It is in this time when they have the revelation. They need both protest and organisation. This is when they have a breakthrough. One of the most important things my training can help give them, is that revelation -- that they need a hybrid between mass protest and organisation.”

IVAN MAROVIC

Whether, like Ivan you are planning to topple dictators with non-violent direct action, or simply want the landlord of your block to fix the heating system, you need to think about how you build power.

It seems that the key, at every level, is to build flexible, playful, structures that are relevant to our current objectives, that are able to operate when there are just a few people interested in your issue, but cope when you have a ‘breakthrough’ such that there are far more people keen to get involved: at the moment of the whirlwind.

How do we create power for our communities?

This is at the heart of organising and movement building. Do the ‘people’ have power or do the ‘authorities’ have it (and if we don’t have it, how can we rebalance the power so that we have some more)? Most of the time, people do not have a great deal of power, in part because they are prepared to accept the decisions made by the authorities. But sometimes, decisions will not just feel wrong to a minority of people, but will outrage the majority. In a democracy and, according to some theorists, even in a dictatorship, all decision makers rely on the tacit consent of the people whose lives are affected by their decisions. For instance, an employer relies on the tacit consent of their workforce; if the workers don’t show up, the boss’s power is empty – he rules over no one.

We don’t need to ‘topple’ a decision maker to make change happen, we just need to redraw the balance of power upon which they rely. This approach to ‘unsettling’ the basis of a decision maker’s power can work in even a very localised setting.

Collectively, our consent allows leaders (whether this be in the workplace, in government, or in a more local public arena) to rely on certain institutions or ‘pillars’ of society. Different governments and leaders will rely on different pillars, so for example a change of government may see the TUC, or the CBI (both potential pillars in our democracy) becoming more influential. This approach is sometimes called a ‘social view of power’ it recognises that people in formal positions of power can at times become powerless (or certainly their power can decrease) if large numbers of people creatively dissent. This process is more often observed at a local level because it takes a lot less power to successfully challenge a local decision maker than it does a national one. When people collectively withdraw their consent, the pillars based as they are on the status quo, become unstable.

There is no better example of this than the Montgomery Bus boycott, launched in 1955, when Rosa Parks, a black woman, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a segregated bus in the deep south of America. The whole of the black community withdrew their consent to the racist segregation laws, and chose to walk to work rather than pay the bus company for the ride. The boycott lasted over 12 months, but was ultimately successful and initiated a new wave of non-violent mass action against segregation and racial injustice in America.

One way to think about power in your community, or within a campaign is to draw a circle in the middle of a large sheet of paper. Write the name of the decision maker you are seeking to influence in the circle, and then think about who influences them; which ‘pillars’ they rely on for their support. Draw ‘legs’ from your circle (lines out from the circle) and at the end of these legs write the name of the person or institution that influences your decision maker. Think about the nature of their relationship, and what each side gains from it. Now, consider how you can influence those who influence the decision maker. This might be as simple as arranging to see them and put your case, but it might involve some form of applying pressure on them (for example by staging an imaginative protest).

Strategy and tactics

Most people faced with an injustice or a widely felt community issue will immediately think: ‘we need to do something’. Too often this translates into ‘we need to do anything’. Strategy is the process by which we evaluate the power imbalance that we need to correct if we want to see change, and the articulating of an overall plan of action. Tactics are the small steps we take towards realising our strategy. Too often people faced with a community issue will start a discussion with ‘what are we going to do’ and lots of suggestions will come forward.

- Let’s start a petition
- Can someone write a leaflet
- Can we get a letter in the local paper
- Can we organise a protest march
- Lets occupy the building!

All of these might be useful tactics, but they do not amount to a strategy. A good way to start to formulate a strategy is to ‘power map’ the issue, identifying all the key players evaluating their power (and whether they are for you or against you). Once you have your power map, you can begin to think about strategy. There are several ways you can change the balance of power:

1. You can seek to persuade (or pressurise) those who oppose you to become neural,
2. You can look at how you can reduce the power of those who oppose you
3. You can seek to increase the power of those who support you
4. You can bring ‘new actors’ into the equation.

By thinking about the most powerful players, and those who are most able to be moved, you can begin to develop a strategy (a theory of change). You really don’t want to be spending all your energy talking to people who support...
you wholeheartedly but do not have, and have no means of gaining power. Equally you don’t want to spend too much time speaking to those who are currently most powerful if they are resolutely against you (you might however want to think about where their power comes from and whether you disrupt it). For example, a head teacher at a school, might impose a new and arbitrary rule that is deeply unpopular with pupils and parents. In some ways they may appear omnipotent, as they are the school head. But a power map might reveal that the teachers union, the school governors, the local authority and Ofsted may all have influence over the decision maker.

**Spectrum of support**

As part of the development of strategy we need to be able to assess where the various players stand on a given issue. The spectrum of support is an excellent tool to visualise different social actors position on an issue. This works just as well if the question is as local as a school crossing or as big as global warming. There are six sectors in the tool: active support, passive support, sympathetic, unsympathetic, passive opposition and active opposition.

While every situation is different, as a general rule campaigners tend to spend too much energy speaking to those people who are at either end of the spectrum: speaking to our active supporters, and confronting the active opposition. Those who are already active supporters will be a minority and will often be referred to somewhat derogatorily as ‘the usual suspects’. Unfortunately, however hard they try, the usual suspects will not, on their own, change the balance of power: their level of activism is already part of the status quo. If you want to see change you have to reach beyond them. Equally those who are actively against you are not the key audience for your campaign (except to the extent that it is realistic to believe that you can move them from active opposition to passive opposition).

In 2000, as part of the Drop the Debt campaign, Bono went to America thinking he would be scheduled to speak to celebrities, business leaders and politicians who would be supportive of the campaign. Instead he was dispatched to speak to key opponents, people from the Christian Right in the Senate who had the power to stop the movement. His job was to use his faith to engage with them with the sole purpose of moving them from active opposition to passive. This was a far more productive use of his time.

In many scenarios the key way to change the balance of power is to engage with the middle sectors, moving them from ambivalent to supportive (and then from passive support to active support). This might sound like a long and laborious process, but campaigns that catch the imagination can move that dial very quickly. The student counter sit-ins of the African American Civil rights movement transformed tens of thousands of passive supporters of civil rights into active participants in a matter of just a few weeks.

On a local level in Stoke Newington, a ‘zombie parade’ in protest at a development that would harm the biodiversity of the local cemetery that was also a nature reserve polarised opinion so that a) almost everyone was supportive of the campaign, and b) lots and lots of people who were not the ‘usual suspects’ got actively evolved (and enjoyed themselves) in protecting their area.
Chapter 9:

Mobilisation theory

John Kelly is a professor of industrial relations and has for many years studied the question of what is it that causes workers to collectivise and to take action. He realised early on that it was not sufficient merely that they had a justified grievance. On the contrary the best-organised workers sometimes had the best conditions.

His mobilisation theory examines the conditions under which individuals feel moved to participate in collective action. He explores:

- The difference between a grievance and a perceived injustice.
- The related concept of blame (or 'attribution')
- How attribution can lead to a sense of a common identify of interests (an 'us' who are being cheated by the 'other'),
- The role of leadership, and in particular the need both to 'frame' the issue and for there to be a credible plan to succeed (elsewhere this is often referred to as a 'theory of change')
- The role of 'external' factors which may impact on the confidence of workers to take action and
- Perhaps most importantly, he says workers undertake a 'cost benefit' analysis. They ask, 'what will we have to put in to this campaign, and what is the prospect of success?' As a general rule, large numbers of people will not collectivise around a campaign that requires a great deal of commitment or sacrifice and is unlikely to succeed.

Below is an article he wrote for a trade union seminar for public sector unions (those unions whose members deliver public services). There are clearly many similarities between why a community simply endures a perceived sense of grievance (lack of affordable housing, youth unemployment, an intrusive night-time economy, etc.), and why a workforce does.

Involving individuals in union activity

Why do some people join unions at their place of work but not others? Why do some people take part in union-organised demonstrations or strikes, but not others? Mobilization theory is a body of research that sets out to answer these types of questions and it can be divided into two branches, covering the individual and society respectively. The individual branch of the theory focuses on the beliefs that a person must hold in order for him/her to participate in collective action, such as joining a union or holding union office.

The societal branch of the theory (which I will refer to as social movement theory) is concerned with the structural, political conditions that encourage or discourage collective action by organizations such as trade unions. So what does each of the theories have to say about joining and participating in unions and about trade union collective action? According to the individual level of analysis, it is not simply dissatisfaction at work which triggers unionization, but a sense of injustice. The dissatisfied employee claims that the rewards they are receiving at work are less than they expect; the employee with a sense of injustice says that what they are receiving is unfair or unjust.

This latter feeling might arise because there has been a breach of their legal rights, or of rights embodied in collective agreements or in widely shared social values. Such rights could be either procedural – the right to a fair hearing on a disciplinary charge, for instance – or substantive, such as the right to a level of redundancy pay set out in longstanding agreements. Now in order to generate support for unionism in a non-union workplace or support for collective action in a unionized environment, such grievances must be felt by substantial numbers of workers, and this is for two reasons. First, workers with a shared sense of grievance are more likely to feel their grievance is legitimate and their demands are justified; second, they are more likely to develop a sense of group identity or loyalty. Workers with a strong sense of group identity will also have a greater capacity to withstand managerial pressure against joining a union or engaging in collective action.
Before getting to that stage however we need to consider the key issue of blame. Even if workers feel a powerful sense of injustice, they are unlikely to act on the feeling unless they hold somebody responsible either for causing their problem in the first place or for providing the solution. The agencies normally identified as responsible for worker problems are of course employers, government departments or the Cabinet itself. Blame, or technically ‘attributions for injustice’, are critical in mobilizing (or demobilizing) people. Attributions focused on impersonal forces such ‘the market’ or ‘globalization’ are disabling (regardless of their validity) because they fail to provide a target for collective action. For example, a study of Russian workers angry about continued non-payment of their wages found that workers who believed the government was to blame were far more likely to engage in collective action than workers who believed their problems were the result of impersonal ‘economic forces’.

Attributing blame is important because it links to the individual’s sense of efficacy, the belief that collective action can make a difference. Both British and American research shows that ‘perceived union instrumentality’, the belief that the union will be effective, is one of the best predictors of whether a worker will vote for or against a union in a recognition ballot.

These sets of beliefs, about a shared sense of injustice and about who is to blame are known as ‘collective action frames’ and they are necessary, but not sufficient, for collective action. There must also be:

- a collective organization that can provide the resources necessary for such action
- a leadership willing and able to mobilize members for action
- a balance of power favourable to such action
- a set of channels through which demands can be placed (an ‘opportunity structure’) such as a bargaining committee
- and minimal costs e.g. a low probability of state or employer repression in response to collective action.

Leadership is critical at all of these stages because it is the responsibility of local and national union leaders to develop these collective action frames by promoting a clear sense of rights or entitlements at work; encouraging people to feel aggrieved when these rights are violated; promoting the belief that particular groups are to blame for problems at work; and encouraging the view that collective organization and action can make a difference.

**Influencing policymakers**

Union collective action is not only targeted at employers, but is also directed at government, both local and national. Social movement theory focuses on the link between collective action and the ‘political opportunity structure’, normally taken to be the executive and legislative branches of the state e.g. the Cabinet, Government Departments and Parliament. Translated into the world of trade unionism, this approach entails a focus on union political action and is clearly relevant to the revitalisation of unions. From the standpoint of union membership, it can be argued that union effectiveness (or instrumentality) can be demonstrated either through economic power in the labour market or through the exercise of political power in relation to the state. Union political influence in turn could impact on membership either because unions secure the passage of legislation which facilitates organizing – such as the Employment Relations Act (1999) – or because such influence convinces non-members that unions are effective and can ‘make a difference’.

According to Tarrow (1994) the likelihood of collective action against government and the chances of it being successful both depend on four factors:

1. first, the degree of openness of the decision-making structure;
2. second, the instability of relationships between different groups within the government;
3. third, the availability of influential allies; and finally,
4. divisions among the ruling elite.

The openness of decision-making structures can vary because of changes in political regimes or, more relevant in the British case, because of changes in government and in government policy towards unions and union influence. Shifting political relationships are especially significant when a government is formed by a coalition of parties or when the governing party rules as a minority administration. Coalition governments often remain in office for shorter periods than single party, majority governments and are vulnerable to pressure, especially when the constituent parties are themselves divided.

Influential allies can either be found inside the state system, for example the House of Commons Select Committees, or within ‘civil society’ where examples include social movements dealing with issues of discrimination, pensions or welfare rights as well as other trade unions adversely affected by government policies.

Finally social movements are more likely to pursue collective action and to be successful where there are divisions among the ruling elite, for example between different factions of the governing party (as with the Conservatives 1992-97 over European integration) or between different state ministries, e.g. between the Treasury and some of the spending ministries.

**Conclusions**

Public sector union leaders at all levels have always been aware of links between day-to-day union activity and government policy. Both the level of public spending, as well as government policy itself, impact in numerous ways on people’s working lives. These links have become even more significant and more apparent as the current government has sought to cut government spending and borrowing rapidly and substantially. While government action arguably makes it easier to allocate blame for work-related problems, it also raises critical questions about union effectiveness. Unions therefore need to recruit, organize and mobilize employees around collective action frames, rooted in a sense of injustice, and to exploit divisions and instabilities in the ranks of government and parliament, linking up where possible with external allies.
Questions

- What is the difference between a grievance and an injustice within Kelly's mobilisation theory? Can you think of examples where effective framing of an issue has resulted in it moving from a grievance to an injustice?

- Saul Alinsky, wrote in his 'Rules for Radicals': *Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it. Don't try to attack abstract corporations or bureaucracies. Identify a responsible individual. Ignore attempts to shift or spread the blame.* This makes a similar point (in Alinsky's unique and characteristic style) to Kelly about attribution. In campaigns or organising drives that you have been involved in, to what extent has there been an explicit identification of the 'decision maker' whose decision making is causing the injustice?

- What are the risks involved in 'personalising' a campaign? How can you frame the message so as to target a decision maker while minimising these risks?

- Kelly says that the role of leadership within the trade union movement involves: promoting a clear sense of rights or entitlements at work; encouraging people to feel aggrieved when these rights are violated; promoting the belief that particular groups are to blame for problems at work; and encouraging the view that collective organization and action can make a difference. How would you define this conception of leadership (for example, is it a starfish or spider conception) and to what extent is it a useful basis for discussing leadership in a community setting?
How you frame your message is very important, it is the first thing that many people will learn about you, and if you get the framing wrong, you may be misunderstood. Framing is the process by which you describe your group and your aspirations, it also includes how you describe the issue that you are seeking to address.

In a community you will often find that problems are framed very vaguely: ‘the lifts hardly ever work and the whole block is run down’. This is clearly a problem, but you can frame it as an issue if you identify a specific change that is achievable (it is within someone’s power to effect the change). For example, you could say: ‘the landlord needs to ensure that the lifts are working, and if they break down an engineer is on site within two hours’.

Here you have identified a decision maker, with the authority to make the change and the specific change that needs to be made. Most importantly, if you were to ask residents on the estate if they agreed with you, then it is probably that almost 100% would agree with you.

Who is your audience?

When framing your issue, you need to think about who you are trying to influence. Is it your community, is it the decision maker, or is it wider society (public opinion)? Sometimes it will be all three. You will want a narrative that mobilises your constituency, challenges a decision maker and ‘polarises’ the issue in wider society such that the decision maker feels they need to engage with you (even if it is just to make the issue go away).

Big enough to matter, but small enough to win

There are competing theories of the value of ‘symbolic’ and ‘instrumental’ demands. These can be understood by their relationship to their audience. Instrumental demands are generally oriented toward decision-makers of dominant institutions. In general, they are specific and winnable even within the existing power relationship (or at least winnable if you can make relatively minor adjustments to the power relationship). So the landlord fixing the lifts is an instrumental demand. When these campaigns are successful, they bring tangible change to people’s lives. Many organisers believe that if you want to change the world, then the first thing you need to do is demonstrate that you can effect some small change that benefits people. There is a whole theory that these changes should be ‘small enough to win, but big enough to matter’. Going back to Kelly’s mobilisation theory, it is possible that if you ask for too much, if your vision is too big, then people think you are a dreamer, and that all your plans, however well meaning, will come to nothing.

Symbolic demands are oriented to the broader public, and are intended to convey big picture, big story ideas. They aim to change the narrative of the community. Perhaps the most successful recent example of this is the ‘Living wage’ campaign initiated by London Citizens, and subsequently taken up by a range of trade union bodies. Symbolic demands work if they appeal to people’s innate sense of justice and they polarise communities in a very constructive way: who for example would oppose the idea that someone working full time should earn a living wage?

Symbolic demands are a way of polarising an issue and changing the dominant narrative. This can then make specific instrumental demands that take you towards the desired outcome more likely to succeed. When Boris Johnson and Price Waterhouse Cooper (neither of whom would necessarily describe themselves as traditional champions of workers rights) spoke out in favour of the living wage, this was a great example of how polarisation works, it meant that those who refused to pay the living wage were on the wrong side of history (and many employers recognised that they were no longer facing just ‘the usual suspects’ of trade union activists) The terrain had changed and increasingly they began to pay the living wage.

Great campaigns often contain both instrumental and symbolic demands. The ‘big vision’ attracts people, and the ‘small steps’ feel like ‘SMART objectives’ (Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound). Indeed the Living Wage campaign embodies both symbolic and instrumental demands. It has both changed the dominant narrative, pulled people into activity around a social justice issue and delivered real improvements in the lives of low waged workers who have won the living wage.
The relationship between ‘big’ and ‘small’ issues.

When you start organising your community, it is likely that people will have little faith in your ability to effect change. They will have heard people complaining about problems before, and they will have seen people try, and often fail, to effect change. This is why understanding the relationship between big and small issues is important.

Naturally you want to achieve big changes. But if you go into a community saying you are going to change the world, there is a risk that people will dismiss you as unrealistic.

However, if you organise a successful campaign over a small issue, you begin to change the experience of your community. Up until now, people's experience is very likely to be that no one listens and nothing changes (at least not for the better). Big vision campaigns that do not succeed, only reinforce this sense of hopelessness. However, a short, successful campaign over a small issue, can be transformational.

However, there is a tension between a ‘big vision’ and a small objective. If your only vision is to get the lifts to work, then while many will applaud, it is not exactly changing the world, the small achievable objective can almost seem insignificant. If you only have a small objective, it can be demobilising because it suggests that this is the limits of your aspirations. However, the combination of a ‘big vision’ with an achievable objective can inspire and mobilise people. If people understand that we want to change the world, but we are going to start with the lifts, that makes a lot of sense.

Some more thoughts on framing your issue

If you are serious about change, then there will be times when you will need to polarise an issue: create a sense that this is an issue that needs to be resolved now and that people have choices about how it is resolved.

Of course, what you don't want to do is polarise an issue in a way that leaves you in a minority. Consider in the summer of 2015, how local campaigners phrased the issue of refugees. This was a time when TV screens and national newspapers were showing photographs of desperate and sometimes drowned refugees.

In some areas, people proudly proclaimed: ‘refugees welcome here’ but in many places a lack of social infrastructure to support refugees had lead to resentment against them.

In other areas people used the slogan: ‘don’t let them drown’. Both of these were polarising slogans, but one would find agreement only from a minority of the community, and the other would have the support of the vast majority.

One of the greatest polarising slogans was from the Occupy movement: ‘We are the 99%’. It is simply brilliant, in that it says; the richest one percent of the country is acting in their own interests, and against the interests of the rest of us. It defined itself not as a movement of a minority, but as a movement encompassing almost all sections of society at a time when those running the economy has gambled billions of pounds and lost, and in the process almost brought down the whole economy.

There are different questions about whether Occupy had a strategy to effect change, but they had a great polarising slogan, and that was a start.

Through our actions, and how we frame issues, if we are strategic and successful, we can help to create a wider base of support and reduce the support for the opposition (we can turn the dial of the spectrum of support; in our direction). So sometimes our actions are not meant to have direct impact, but are designed to change the public narrative.

To create a sense that an issue needs to be looked at in a different light and that key ‘players’ need to re-evaluate their approach to it.

Most importantly, we want to bring the needs and aspirations of the public into the fore of the decision making process: making their views and opinions a factor in the equation of power politics.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to people moving from passive to active support is a sense of impotence. Time and time again, people will tell you: ‘I really admire what you do, it is great someone is out protesting about this, but you know they are not going to listen to us and they are going to do what they want to do in the end’.

Unfortunately, this is not an irrational view. Too often progressive campaigns lose. Community facilities are closed, affordable housing is demolished, rents are hiked up, decisions are railroaded through by decision makers who can live with our disorganised dissent. This is why a strategic discussion really early on is so important. If you move straight to tactics without a strategy, then you have nothing to say to the passive supporter who fears that getting involved will be a waste of time.
So you have identified your community and your issue, agreed your narrative, and now you want to mobilise: but what organisational structures do you need? Most campaign groups do not give serious consideration to this issue, and many long established groups (trade unions are a good example) retain the structure they inherited irrespective of whether it fits their current needs.

There are some practical considerations, if you are looking to apply for grant money then you will probably need some form of constitution, and to appoint a committee with a Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. But, how should decisions be made? By an elected committee, or by an open meeting? Will you have a formal membership with eligibility criteria, or will decisions be taken by whoever turns up? While there are the pros and cons to each approach it may be that there are deeper considerations. In what way will your choice of structure impact on the effectiveness of your organisation?

For many years there have been debates about appropriate structures that help groups reach their potential. While it is unlikely that there is a definitive answer to the question: ‘what is the best structure to adopt?’ it is clear that every organisation needs to think as seriously about the structure they adopt as they do their ‘narrative’ and their strategy. Structure after all is the mechanism by which your campaign either allows the commitment of your supporters to be harvested and then directed into effective action or, in too many cases, impedes that process.

In the 1970s the Women’s Liberation Movement, concerned at the exclusion of women from equality within society, spent a great deal of time discussing structure and in many cases sought to exclude hierarchies from their organisations (hierarchies that they felt reflected the society norms they wished to change).

But, as we will see, some feminists later suggested that a lack of structure could itself become oppressive. So we will explore the arguments for ‘open system’ organisations and the arguments against ‘structurelessness’.

Chapter 11:
Structure for your campaign

The Starfish and the Spider

In 2006, Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom published: *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*

The book addressed the challenges faced by traditional businesses, largely arising from the ability of the internet to change the external environment in a way that they were often unprepared for.

They claimed that the Napster file-sharing programme rewrote the rules for the global music industry. The free, online community-based Wikipedia is proving to be as reliable as (and utilised far more than) Encyclopaedia Britannica. Skype means that you can make international phone calls for free (at a huge cost in loss of revenue to traditional telecoms companies). Meanwhile the free adds website Craigslist was damaging the global newspaper industry. Companies like YouTube, Uber and AirBnB are transforming the way business operates.

Definitions

Brafman and Beckstrom suggest that structures either be the traditional ‘spider’ model, which have a rigid hierarchy and top-down leadership, or revolutionary ‘starfish,’ which rely on the power of peer relationships.
While spiders and starfish may look alike, starfish have a remarkable quality to them. Cut off the leg of a spider, and you have a seven-legged creature on your hands; cut off its head and you have a dead spider. But cut off the arm of a starfish and it will grow a new one. Not only that, but the severed arm can grow an entirely new body. Starfish can achieve this feat because they are decentralized; every major organ is replicated across each arm.

In reality this is describing two opposing ends of a spectrum, and the majority of organisations have a structure which sits somewhere between the two. None-the-less, their categorisation is a useful one if we are to consider the pros and cons of different structures.

They assert that traditionally, major organisations (businesses, trade unions, campaign groups) were ‘spider like’. But today, it seems that starfish organisations are on the ascendency.

Spider organisations are centralised and have clearly defined structure. You know who is in charge. They can often be inflexible with internal power blocs that can operate against the interests of the organisation as a whole.

Starfish organisations, on the other hand, are based on completely different principles. They tend to organise around a shared ideology or a simple platform, are hugely decentralised, and as the external environment changes, they can mutate.

Pre the net

The starfish/spider conflict predates the internet: the Spanish army (the perfect example of a spider organisation) defeated the Aztecs (who had a centralised spider culture) in a few years but couldn’t defeat the Apaches (a starfish culture) in 200 years. The Apaches persevered because they were decentralised. This was a clash of two opposite systems – centralised (command and control, rules) and decentralised (no clear leader, no hierarchy, no headquarters; open system, distributed power; flexibility, shared power, ambiguity).

Brafman and Beckstrom suggest that Alcoholics Anonymous is an example of a starfish organisation. At AA, no one’s in charge and yet everyone is in charge. You automatically become part of the leadership – an arm of the starfish – the moment you join. Because no one is in charge, everyone is responsible for keeping themselves and everyone else on track. Members have always been able to directly help each other without requiring permission or approval.

Again according to Brafman and Beckstrom’s analysis, Quakers are a long established precursor to today’s starfish organisations, and their role in the movements for the abolition of slavery is seen as an example of how an open organisation united by ideology can mutate and rapidly gain influence.

How to distinguish between spiders and starfish

1. Is there a person in charge?
   If you see a pyramid and a CEO you are probably looking at a spider (hierarchy and clear accountability). Starfish by comparison tend to be open, flat systems.

2. Are there headquarters?
   Starfish don’t depend on a permanent location or a central headquarters. Alcoholics Anonymous is equally distributed across thousands of community centres, churches, even airports. They are found wherever a group of members chooses to meet.

3. If you thump it on the head, will it die?
   Starfish often don’t have a head to chop off.

4. Is there a clear division of roles?
   In decentralised organisations, it is often the case that anyone can do anything. Any and every activity is within anyone’s job description. This is in complete contrast to the rigorously defined ‘job descriptions’ found in spider organisations.

5. If you take out a unit, is the organisation harmed?
   Units of a decentralised organisation are by definition completely autonomous. Isolate an AA circle from the AA organisation and both will be able to survive.

6. Are knowledge and power concentrated or distributed?
   In spider organisations, power and knowledge are concentrated at the top. In starfish organisations, power is spread throughout. Each member is assumed to be equally knowledgeable and has power equal to that of any other member.

7. Is the organisation flexible or rigid?
   Decentralised organisations are very amorphous and fluid. They are constantly spreading, growing, shrinking, mutating, dying off, and re-emerging.

8. Can you count the employees or participants?
   With starfish organisations, it is not only that no one’s keeping track, but also that anyone can become a member of an open organisation – or likewise withdraw their membership – at any time.

9. Are working groups funded by the organisation or are they self-funding?
   In spider organisations, all budgets are approved centrally. In starfish organisations, there is often no central well of money. Individual units might receive funding from outside sources, but they are largely responsible for acquiring and managing those funds.

10. Do working groups communicate directly or through intermediaries?
    In open systems (starfish organisations) communication occurs directly between members. No roads lead to Rome because there is no Rome.
Brafman and Beckstrom identified five ‘legs’ of decentralised organisations. There are many parallels between their findings and principles of community organising.

**Leg 1 – Circles.**

These are important to nearly every decentralised organisation. Once you join, you’re an equal. It’s up to you how you contribute to the best of your ability. Until the internet age, circles were confined to a physical location. From the Quakers to abolitionists, to Alcoholics Anonymous, physical circles were integral to starfish-like organisations. As a general rule, these circles need to be small, when circles take on more than about 14 members the bond breaks down. Instead of rules, they develop norms. These norms become the backbone of the circle. Self-enforced, these norms can be more powerful than rules. As the norms of a circle develop, and as members spend more time together, they begin to trust one another. In community organising language, this would be referred to as the power or ‘relational organising’.

**Leg 2 – The Catalyst.**

Leaders of starfish organisations are vastly different from traditional executives. In open organisations, a catalyst is the person who initiates a circle and then fades away into the background. They generated ideas and then allow the circle to follow through. They get a decentralised organisation going and then cede control to the members. Letting go of the leadership role, the catalyst transfers ownership and responsibility to the circle. Circles don’t form on their own; a catalyst develops an idea, shares it with others, and leads by example. In community organising theory, this would be seen as the role of the ‘organiser’, whose role is to encourage others to identify their own objectives and create the organisation capable of delivering them.

**Leg 3 – Ideology.** Ideology is the glue that holds decentralised organisations together.

In community organising language, this would be referred to as the ‘defining narrative’, or the ‘story of us’.

**Leg 4 – The Pre-existing Network.**

Everything comes from somewhere. The movement for the abolition of slavery in the UK, drew heavily on the support of Quakers, who at the time had over 20,000 members in England. They were already well versed in working together in circles and shared a common ideology. Brafman and Beckstrom believe that almost every decentralised organisation that has made it big was launched from a pre-existing platform. In other words, we never start from a blank sheet of paper, there are already existing networks that we can engage with and use as a launch pad for something new.

**Leg 5 – The Champion.**

In Brafman and Beckstrom approach there is a distinction between the Catalyst and the Champion. The Catalyst is the initial inspiration, who fades into the background, the Champion emerges from the circle to become the acknowledged leader (simply through being the most determined or most hard working). In organising theory, we might refer to this person as the organics leader.
That clears that up then?

Brafman and Beckstrom, make a compelling case for starfish type organisations, but there is a strong counter-argument.

The Tyranny of Structurelessness

In 1970 the American feminist, Jo Freeman, wrote an essay: ‘The Tyranny of Structurelessness’. It was inspired by her experiences in the 1960s women’s liberation movement which had adopted many of the structures; open access, circles, lack of leaders and consensus decision making, that would be characterised by Brafman and Beckstrom as ‘starfish’ qualities. She was concerned both with ‘hidden power relations’ within the ‘starfish’ organisations and with effectiveness and accountability.

It begins:

**During the years in which the women’s liberation movement has been taking shape, a great emphasis has been placed on what are called leaderless, structureless groups as the main -- if not sole -- organizational form of the movement.** The source of this idea was a natural reaction against the over-structured society in which most of us found ourselves, and the inevitable control this gave others over our lives, and the continual elitism of the Left and similar groups among those who were supposedly fighting this overstructuredness.

But despite this ‘great emphasis, she discovered that:

Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a structureless group. Any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The structure may be flexible; it may vary over time; it may evenly or unevenly distribute tasks, power and resources over the members of the group

For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can happen only if they are formalized. …

‘Structurelessness’ is organizationally impossible. We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group, only whether or not to have a formally structured one. …

A structured group always has formal structure, and may also have an informal, or covert, structure. It is this informal structure, particularly in Unstructured groups, which forms the basis for elites. …

All groups create informal structures as a result of interaction patterns among the members of the group. Such informal structures can do very useful things But only Unstructured groups are totally governed by them. When informal elites are combined with a myth of ‘structurelessness’, there can be no attempt to put limits on the use of power.

She concludes with

There are some principles we can keep in mind that are essential to democratic structuring and are also politically effective:

1. Delegation of specific authority to specific individuals for specific tasks by democratic procedures. Letting people assume jobs or tasks only by default means they are not dependably done. If people are selected to do a task, preferably after expressing an interest or willingness to do it, they have made a commitment which cannot so easily be ignored.
2. Requiring all those to whom authority has been delegated to be responsible to those who selected them. This is how the group has control over people in positions of authority. Individuals may exercise power, but it is the group that has ultimate say over how the power is exercised.
3. Distribution of authority among as many people as is reasonably possible. This prevents monopoly of power and requires those in positions of authority to consult with many others in the process of exercising it. It also gives many people the opportunity to have responsibility for specific tasks and thereby to learn different skills.
4. Rotation of tasks among individuals. Responsibilities which are held too long by one person, formally or informally, come to be seen as that person’s “property” and are not easily relinquished or controlled by the group. Conversely, if tasks are rotated too frequently the individual does not have time to learn her job well and acquire the sense of satisfaction of doing a good job.
5. Allocation of tasks along rational criteria. Selecting someone for a position because they are liked by the group or giving them hard work because they are disliked serves neither the group nor the person in the long run. Ability, interest, and responsibility have got to be the major concerns in such selection. People should be given an opportunity to learn skills they do not have, but this is best done through some sort of “apprenticeship” program rather than the “sink or swim” method. Having a responsibility one can't handle well is demoralizing. Conversely, being blacklisted from doing what one can do well does not encourage one to develop one’s skills. Women have been punished for being competent throughout most of human history; the movement does not need to repeat this process.
6. Diffusion of information to everyone as frequently as possible. Information is power. Access to information enhances one’s power. When an informal network spreads new ideas and information among themselves outside the group, they are already engaged in the process of forming an opinion -- without the group participating. The more one knows about how things work and what is happening, the more politically effective one can be.
7. Equal access to resources needed by the group. This is not always perfectly possible, but should be striven for. A member who maintains a monopoly over a needed resource (like a printing press owned by a husband, or a darkroom) can unduly influence the use of that resource. Skills and information are also resources. Members' skills can be equitably available only when members are willing to teach what they know to others.
Democratic centralism

Before closing this section, it would be remiss to ignore the dominant form of organisation that the ‘revolutionary left’ have adopted for generations. Democratic centralism is a form of ‘cabinet responsibility’ which says that once an organisation has adopted a position, then you either accept it or you leave the organisation. While it accepts debate in advance of a decision being made, once it is made, the decision is binding on all members. Originally articulated by Lenin it was perhaps best (or, depending on your views, worst) articulated by Trotsky in the following 1924 speech to the Party Congress:

None of us desires or is able to dispute the will of the party. The party in the last analysis is always right, because the party is the single historical instrument given to the proletariat for the solution of its basic problems. I have already said that in front of one’s own party nothing could be easier than to acknowledge a mistake, nothing easier than to say: “All my criticisms, my statements, my warnings, my protests — the whole thing was simply a mistake.” I cannot say that, however, comrades, because I do not think it. I know that one must not be right against the party. One can be right only with the party, and through the party, for history has no other road for being in the right. The English have a saying: “My country — right or wrong.” With far more historical justification we may say: my party — in certain concrete cases — right or wrong ... And if the party adopts a decision which one or another of us thinks unjust, he will say: just or unjust it is my party, and I shall support the consequences of the decision to the end

Democratic centralism is clearly an extreme form of the spider approach to organisation and one that continues to dominate many political formulations on the left. Its proponents say that it allows the groups leaders to make decisions in rapidly changing circumstances and then allow the organisation to take collective and decisive action, its opponents suggest that it turns supporters into unthinking robots who are discouraged from thinking for themselves.

Questions

- Why not draw up a list of the pros and cons of starfish and spider like organisations in the context of the issues you wish to organise around?
- Consider Jo Freeman’s critique of structurelessness. To what extent does it apply to groups that you have been involved in?
- Looking at her seven organisational principles, discuss whether, and to what extent, you agree with them, and whether you think others should be added to the list.
- The concept of democratic centralism, or cabinet responsibility is almost the antithesis of the starfish organisation, but can you think of any situations in which adopting the approach ‘accept the decision or leave’ would be helpful to building a strong, confident and inclusive community?
Chapter 12:
The rhythm of a campaign

Perhaps you know what it is like, an issue arises and everyone is hopping mad. There is a big meeting and everyone expresses their concern. There is a petition and a protest, and a little later there is a slightly smaller meeting. Before you know it, everyone has forgotten how angry they were and how they planned to actually make real change. If you want to make change, you have to plan for the rhythm of the campaign. Very few people will want to be very active all the time. People have families, jobs, friends and 100 other things encroaching on their time. So the only way to engage them successfully is to ensure they understand that they can contribute when they want/can, and that they will still be important as a supporter.

You also need to plan for the period when nothing is happening in your campaign. This is in many ways the hardest part. It is easy to organise a lobby of a meeting where a crucial decision is being made: everyone will want to be there. But what about the time when there is no obvious crisis? There is a rhythm to successful campaigns and it includes both times of intense activity and ‘down time’. Campaigns seldom simply continue to grow in a tidy way. There will be great surges of interest, and then times of setback and disengagement. When there is a drop in the pace, this is an opportunity to do everything that you cannot do during a time of frenetic activity. It is a time to divide up tasks that everyone was too busy to do when the campaign was in full flow. These tasks include ensuring that everyone is kept informed, and asked how they want to contribute. You might want to establish a few sub-groups, for example: a research group, a publicity group, and a social group. These will then develop their own rhythm as they work to increase the capacity of the group.

Typical phases of a campaign.

No two campaigns are identical, and because we don’t ever know all the variables (including how the ‘target’ decision maker will respond) it is never possible to plan a campaign totally in advance. However, it is possible to anticipate and prepare for various phases of a campaign. Things may change, but having thought through how you will deal with each phase is an important way to avoid being wrong footed later.

Escalation

So a big issue is happening, but no-one knows, or realises the implications. A few of you have discussed this issue, but it is now time to escalate. The function of escalation in is to create the opportunity for the wider public to take notice of the issue and take a stance on it. It can include a process of polarisation, a process that asks: ‘which side are you on?’

Obviously you want more and more of the public to choose the side of your cause. As we have seen, this involves framing the issue well and demonstrating that you have a solution to the problem. Mere protest against something that cannot be changed is a waste of your time and everyone else’s. But if you say: ‘we can do this differently, and better’ while still satisfying the majority of stakeholders, then you will have everyone’s ears.

Trigger events

Trigger events are the opportune moments of escalation. They can be completely outside the control or influence of a campaign (such as the decision by neo-nazis to march in Stamford Hill) or they can be created deliberately (UK uncut actions for example).

A trigger event is an opportunity to promote and publicise your demands. Strategic preparation is essential both for trigger events outside of the control of your campaign (such as the announcement of an unwanted development) and for those trigger events you create (such as bringing people together on an estate to formulate a series of ‘demands’)

A trigger event that is outside your control can provide you with an opportunity to reach large numbers of people. It is a time when people will want to see a response that is proportionate, and effective. In the words of the old saying: ‘never waste a crisis’. It is an opportunity to speak to people, because they are now listening. Their attention has been grabbed, they are more likely to come to your meeting, or participate in your action.

A trigger event that you create is of course wholly in your control. For example, you may decide that you plan to bring everyone together on an estate for a listening campaign.
This may not sound very radical, but if people feel that they are being invited to speak for themselves (as opposed to being spoken to) then the chances are they will value the opportunity and warm to becoming part of your movement.

**Leadership identification**

Imagine that 100 people come to your meeting; there will be many who speak eloquently (and others who merely speak at length). One of your tasks is to work out which of these people should be coming along to your smaller strategy meetings. While you can educate people about an issue, encourage them to explore options and outline a proposed tactic in a large meeting, you cannot strategise in a meeting of much more than 12 people. So when you call the strategy meeting you need the natural leaders in your community to be there. You also want to attract to this group people who are going to be interested in the long run, and who are prepared to do some of the less exciting work.

So how do you spot community leaders?

While community leaders may well have official leadership roles in a community, it is a big mistake to assume that just because someone has a leadership role, they are a leader. Imagine how many managers you have had who couldn’t manage; it is the same in the community.

So trade union reps, tenants reps, faith leaders and local politicians may all have ‘leadership roles’ and some of them may be genuine leaders, but many of them will not be.

Watching how other people respond when someone speaks is a great way to start identifying ‘natural’ leaders (these people might not know they are leaders, but if everyone stops and listens when they speak then they have a leadership role. Another way to find leaders is by asking people to refer you to someone trusted. Don’t ask people ‘who are the leaders on this estate,’ but rather ask a trust question: ‘if you needed to leave your child with a neighbour, who would it be?’ or in a workplace environment: ‘if you had a problem with your work, who would you turn to for advice.’ This is the way you begin to identify your ‘leadership group,’ the final step is to undertake what is known as a ‘one to one’ discussion

**The escalator of activity**

Not everyone will be a natural leader, but there will be lots of people who want to help. You will want to support as many as possible to become leaders, but ultimately your objective is to provide a role for everyone who wants to contribute that meets their commitment and skills. You will need a plan to involve new people into your campaign and to train them to ensure they understand your group’s principles, objective, and strategy.

If you want to build a successful campaign, you have to be prepared to capture energy and interest when it is there. This is easy during the trigger event phase; you have lots of things to ask people to do. But if you don’t have a plan, for involving people during your period of escalation, you may see many new faces, but will then watch them dissipate over time. In most situations, you only have one or at most two opportunities to engage someone and get them involved so the one to one meetings (see below) are crucial. If you don’t consciously plan opportunities for people to become full participants in your campaign, new people will have no way to get involved and those you have will soon drift away.

If people have no way to get involved, your active popular support isn’t growing, and unless your support is growing, you are not going to disturb the power structures that need to be disturbed to win your campaign.

**Meet and greet**

A great tactic for getting people involved is a ‘meet and greet’ event. It is simple and very effective. You invite everyone to an event, where you put on a little refreshments, have a couple of short introductory or welcome speeches, and then simply let people eat and talk together. Of course you would also want to have a ‘ask’ for them. So you might have two or three different things that people could do to help. The idea of a ‘menu’ of activity is really helpful, as it means people can select the option that most fits their commitment, their skills and their comfort zone.
Organisers will often talk about the value of 'one-to-one' discussions. It has become a term that is almost jargon, so let's break it down.

A one to one discussion is nothing more than a structured, intentional discussion with someone. They are important because they help create trust and develop what are referred to as 'public relationships'. A working definition of a one-to-one conversation is that it is a purposeful discussion designed to create the opportunity to listen to a person's concerns and feelings about an issue, with the aim of identifying an action or series of actions that they commit to.

Because these conversations are often emphasised in community organising training, and because they have become so identified with community organising, they have gathered a sense of mystery and 'otherness'. In reality they are little more than meeting someone for coffee, and getting to know a little bit about them, the issues that concern them and the things that motivate them. The difference is that the discussion has a purpose. In terms of leadership identification, you want to know what motivates someone, who they feel about the issue that you have identified, and whether they are ready to make a commitment of their time to your campaign. According to the theory, one-to-one should last about 40 minutes. Anything less does not give you the opportunity for a sufficiently deep discussion, anything more may be an imposition on the person's time.

**Tips for a good one to one.**

**Be prepared**
Don't waste people's time, find out about the person in advance, and refresh your memory before you meet. You want to show interest in them, but you also want to consider what you want them to contribute to your campaign.

**Legitimize yourself**
Very often someone who is a community leader will have met people who may be interested in an issue, but are not interested in the community as such. So do share a little about who you are, your background and your motivation. This is more important than the issue.

**Listen**
You are not there primarily to convince them to support your campaign. Leaders do not change their minds because someone came and told them they should. You are there to understand the person, so that you can then suggest that they may be interested because it ties in with their core values.

**Agitate**
Share that you have a belief that around your issue things could be different, and that if the community gets organised then we have a realistic prospect of making a real difference.

**Get a commitment**
Before you enter the discussion, you should have an idea of what you are going to ask this person to commit to. However, as the discussion unfolds (thorough your active listening) you may realise that there is a more important 'ask'. However, the 'golden rule' is not to leave the discussion without a clear 'ask' with the intention of receiving a clear, specific and time-bound commitment.

**Follow up**
Remember that you are trying to build a long-term relationship, so a thank you, and a follow up checking in on progress on their commitment is invaluable.
An introduction to community organising
I
herent in the notion of community organising is a sense that communities can make their own history, by deciding to come together and act collectively. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, which effectively relaunched the civil rights movement, demonstrated that, even if they had little money, the oppressed, by their sheer numbers, had power if they chose to act collectively.

However there is a contradiction here. The idea of an ‘organiser’ entering a community and organising on behalf of people who are currently unorganised seems to breach the golden rule: ‘don’t do for others what they can do for themselves’ (but rules are of course meant to be broken).

It also suggests that perhaps they are not the people they have been waiting for, but rather they have been waiting for an organiser to be dispatched to their community.

However, we should not be afraid of such contradictions. After all life is full of them, and as a general rule, it makes more sense to have ‘guiding principles’ rather than inflexible ‘rules’.

Education and training is one of the processes by which we move people from being supporters who get involved to being leaders who take responsibility for the direction of the group.

**Pedagogy (the theory of education)**

A guiding principle of organising is that communities learn by reflecting on their actions. But how do you teach people the skills to strategise, reflect, mobilise and evaluate? A very useful starting point for this discussion is a book written by Paulo Freire, called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (pedagogy just means a theory and practice of learning). Dedicated to ‘the oppressed’ his theories are based on his own experience (and reflections on) teaching literacy to Brazilian adults and forms part of a rich literature of anti-colonialism.

Friere spent many years working and teaching primarily among the illiterate poor. In Brazil at that time, literacy was a requirement for voting in presidential elections and Friere was determined to find ways to tackle the illiteracy, which he saw as a deeply undemocratic factor in Brazil. He developed a form of emancipatory pedagogy, inherent within which was the concept of ‘cultural circles’ (the role of circles are discussed elsewhere in this guide).

In these cultural circles the illiterate students and tutor together discuss themes that have significance within the context of the students’ lives. These themes, are ‘discovered’ through dialogue and express the principle challenges or contradictions that confront the students in their world. As students ‘decode’ these contradictions, they come to recognise them as situations within which they are involved as ‘subjects’ (i.e. they are actors within the situation with alternative choices to make). There is a process through which these contradictions are initially represented in pictorial form, and as the discussions progress (over days and weeks) the students recognise the need for literacy, it becomes a need to record the discussion and to progress it.

For Friere, learning to read in this way, is both about developing the skill of reading, but also about the equally important skill of reflection on your experience and how it can be changed it is ‘self-transformation producing a stance of intervention’. Indeed the process is symbiotic, because reading and writing becomes a necessary skill to continue to engage in reflection.

In 1962 while working at Recife University, he undertook an experiment in which 300 sugarcane workers were taught to read and write in just 45 days. In response to this experiment, the Brazilian government approved the creation of thousands of cultural circles across the country. However, in 1964, a military coup put an end to that effort and Freire was imprisoned for 70 days. After his release he left the country and published a number of books. He later returned to Brazil and continued his life long work as an educator.

Friere enjoyed contradictions. He felt that by exploring contradictions it was possible to learn: he also believed that it was possible through reflection to reconcile apparently contradictory concepts: reason and passion, teaching and learning, education and organization, leadership and humility, knowledge and love, academic rigor and compassion, detailed analysis and individual anecdotes, intellectual freedom and social commitment.
His starting point was a complete rejection that there is such a thing as abstract knowledge. He believed that education was never neutral, it could either be used to reinforce ideological structures of domination (i.e. teach people ‘their place’) or it could be used to promote social transformation (by teaching learners to ask ‘why’ and even ‘why not’). He rejected traditional education as seeking to inculcate and sanctify ‘official knowledge’, which he believed too often was actually a structural mechanism of oppression.

He believed that all knowledge is socially constructed (meaning it only has value within society), and for the most part, in an unequal society, the role of ‘official knowledge’ is to serve the interests of the rich and powerful. Today, he would assert that the ‘accepted wisdom’ regarding the ‘need’ for austerity, the role of the ‘market’ and the debate about immigration to be examples of socially constructed ‘knowledge’ that serves specific interests.

Freire dismissively labels traditional pedagogy as the ‘banking model’ because it treats the student as an empty vessel and the teachers’ role is simply to ‘deposit’ knowledge. In short Friere believed that education was not about learning facts, but about practicing the art of identifying, categorising and exploring the relationship between facts.

Freire’s believes in a form of education that, ‘does not conceal — in fact, which proclaims — its own political character’. In the 1960s, this was considered a revolutionary statement. Today it is accepted as mainstream (thanks in large part to the role of feminist academics in the 1970s who rejected the previous orthodoxy that only ‘value free’ research and knowledge were legitimate.

Freire believes that the learners can only learn meaningfully if they are co-creators of knowledge. In other words, the teacher is not the only person who comes into the classroom with knowledge, and a good teacher, acknowledging and respecting this, will also learn from their pupils.

He believes that the role of education should be to cultivate students’ natural capacity for critical thought. Critical thinking is essential to intelligent decision-making. Real education is not the collection of unconnected facts, but is a process involving not only the consumption of ‘concepts’ but the creation and re-creation of new ones.

This creation of new concepts arises out of a dialogue between the concepts presented by the teacher and the lived experience of the learner. Each individual learner must practice the skill of looking critically at their own experience through authentic dialogue. Inherent in this approach to learning is the right of the learner to self-expression: a self-expression which is as valid as any put forward by the teacher.

In this process, the learner becomes, not the mere passive recipient of ‘absolute truths’, but a participant in the process of creating knowledge.

Real knowledge arose from a process of reflection on your experience and your attempts to change that experience. In many ways Freire is arguing that the role of education is to teach the learner how to learn what they already know from their lived experience, but have yet to synthesise into knowledge.

Training

An effective tool for involving people is to organise a training/strategy event, this provides the opportunity to explore the issue you are concerned with, think about the power relationships and introduce your organisation: your story, your strategy and your structure.

By bringing new people together to explore what they want to contribute and to introduce them to the campaign’s strategy, you can empower people to understand how they can contribute (and you may find a few challenging questions about assumptions in your strategy that can lead to you rethinking and improving on your approach).

Training/strategy days only really work if the new people who come are seen as active contributors of knowledge, skill and experience, rather than simply passive recipients of received wisdom from the existing campaign leadership. Few people want to volunteer simply to be ‘tool’, directed as to what to do for your campaign (and even if they did, you would be wasting a valuable resource if you did not tap into their ideas, knowledge and networks). Many people will respond much better to being told that their ideas are as important as the tasks they contribute. Indeed, they will enjoy the process of thinking through the challenges faced by your campaign.

Training/strategy discussions

When developing your training, you need to consider: what do people need to know in order to get involved and contribute in a way that is consistent with your group’s goals and values?

The objective of community training can be broken down into a number of priorities:

1. To build the capacity of your group by involving new members and allowing them to find the best way for that they can contribute
2. To disseminate (and reinforce) the culture and strategy of the organisation
3. To learn from the experience of the new people and ensure that their knowledge, ideas and skills enrich your existing strategy.

If you have a good strategy/training event, then you will not merely transfer knowledge to the new people, but will create new knowledge and insights as the newcomers contribute to the overall knowledge base of your organisation.
Part of the process of effecting change is to become a big deal. You need to reach beyond a small group, and for this to happen you need to have a structure that allows people with very different experiences and world-views to feel ownership of your campaign. This is why, even at the start, defining your group’s objectives, and its values, is so important. It determines how you frame yourself to your community (the people you wish to influence). If it is too narrow, then you will have polarised a community negatively, if it is too broad, then you risk losing focus.

Very often, decision makers will expect a protest of some sort when they make a decision that they know we won’t like. Sometimes they refer to this as ‘noise in the machine’ most often they dismiss it as the actions of ‘the usual suspects’. If we are to succeed in effecting lasting change, then not only must we reach beyond ‘the usual suspects’, but we also have to organise people with whom we may disagree on a wide range of issues around a specific goal.

This is where the question of decentralisation becomes important. You don’t need one or two ‘great leaders’ to make a great campaign, what you need is the opportunity for lots of people to contribute ideas, and a process that allows those ideas to be distilled and evaluated. If the ideas are consistent with the group’s values, then people should feel empowered to take them forward. One of the great things about a campaign that has multiple leaders is that it will have multiple tactics. And nothing is more effective than a campaign that keeps growing and using ever more imaginative (and fun) tactics.

Doing the donkey work

All campaigning should involve an element of fun (we don’t have to be dreary and boring just because we are serious about effecting change). However, there are some tasks which are essential to moving a campaign forward that are less glamorous. You will need a conscious process by which a smaller group of committed people share the essential but less interesting tasks: the ‘donkey work’.

This leadership team will focus not just on the process of individual tasks, but will want to create a culture within the organisation that ensures that people who are committed to the group are supported by each other.

Key objectives might include:

- Establishing and sustaining a process of involving new people who want to support your campaign.
- Creating a internal culture of respect, open to different opinions
- Ensuring that the campaign is systematically engaging with the wider community
- Building a practice of learning from experience (reflecting on actions and results)
- Planning for the more complex tasks (legal challenges, report writing, establishing a social media profile etc.
- Collecting and raising funds (and recording what money was spent on)
- Developing a conscious ‘fun’ side to your activity.
An introduction to community organising
Chapter 16:

Ten tips for winning

Thank you for reading this guide, we hope you found it helpful, so to conclude we thought we would include a simple checklist that you may find helpful.

**Build a core team**
You cannot do it on your own, so at the very beginning you need to find four or five people who are going to take this seriously and are willing to learn new skills, and work hard to effect change.

**Listen to your community**
It really does not matter how important something is to you, if the rest of the community are not interested, then how will you build sufficient power to make progress?

**Map power in your community**
If you don't know the decision maker, and what makes them tick, then it will be hard to decide on a strategy. Equally, you need to know who are the ‘movers and shakers’ in a community and which, if any, of them are going to be sympathetic to your cause.

**Be realistic (but raise a vision)**
We all want international peace, the eradication of poverty and the reversal of global warming. But if there are only six people in the room, then perhaps your first objective needs to be one that demonstrates that small numbers of people can effect positive change while raising the possibility of bigger changes if more people get involved.

**Be clear what your objective is**
If you cannot articulate your objective in a couple of sentences, then people won’t easily know what you stand for.

**What is your solution**
It is easy to be ‘against’ something, but unless you have a viable alternative to the current situation, then how will you know what success looks like, and more importantly, how will you develop a strategy to deliver that success?

**Think about what the issue looks like from your target’s perspective**
There is nothing worse than dealing with a decision maker who you don’t understand. How can you persuade them if you don’t know what motivates them? How can you gently pressurise them if you don’t understand what they care about?

**Train your supporters**
Community organising involves a number of techniques which many people do not often use in other areas of their lives, so rather than expecting every supporter to learn these spontaneously, perhaps you should introduce them to the concepts as part of a training programme.

**Be creative**
Building a strong inclusive community should be a lot of fun. If you reduce it to standing on street corners collecting signatures in the rain, then pretty soon, you will find a dwindling set of supporters. But if you organise events that are fun and creative, then people will be keen to work with you.

**And finally**
Celebrate whenever you win or lose.