

# It's A Skill, Not A Mystery: What is an Organizer?

by Eric Odell, *Threshold Magazine*

(NLNS) One of the most basic questions we must ask ourselves is how to conceive of the role we play in making social change.

Most of us have an instinctive understanding at some level of what this means. It is important, though, to take a step back and really take a hard look at the nature of our organizing work so that we can do it more effectively. The following lessons are expanded from a guide which my SEAC (Student Environmental Action Committee) group, the University of Minnesota Campus Greens, developed.

What is an organizer? Is it a mystery? No. But it is not an innate skill one is born with, either. Being an organizer is something you must learn. Obviously, then, consciously examining how to organize will be much more useful than just hoping you will somehow accidentally pick up what you need to know somewhere along the way.

**\* An organizer has a commitment to a vision of how things might be different**, and is always trying to figure out the best way to make his or her vision come about. If you are dedicating a significant space in your life to making change, it is important to have an idea of what we are trying to change society into. This is called "vision" (also known by certain former president's as "that vision thing"). It is what drives all of the most energetic and committed organizers. Figuring out how to get there is known as "strategy." Both of these together is called "theory," and we need both if we are to be successful.

**\* An organizer is a person who organizes:** lectures, study groups, panel discussions, rallies, speeches, conferences, demonstrations, protests, and so on. Sitting around in meetings doesn't in and of itself change anything. Organizing consists of getting out and doing events and actions that have the dual objectives of being a part of a focused campaign to make a concrete change in society, and being designed to bring more people into organizing.

**\* An organizer is reliable and dependable, shows up on time, and follows through on responsibilities.** It is easy to have a laid-back attitude about showing up for meetings and carrying out tasks you have agreed to take on, but this can be very problematic. We all need to very clearly understand the commitments we make to a group when we become involved in organizing, and the concomitant degree of discipline required of us to follow through on those commitments. When people frequently flake out, it puts a heavy burden on the rest of the group and makes it harder for them to do their part.

**\* An organizer does all different kinds of work cheerfully, and is committed to learning organizing skills.** It is dangerous to let the attitude develop that certain things are beneath you once you have learned a certain amount about organizing. A lot of the work involved in organizing is fun, but by no means all of it. The responsibility of rolling up one's sleeves and doing the distasteful and

tedious work should fall equally on everyone's shoulders. In addition, don't for a second believe that you "know it all" about organizing. Always be open to new lessons.

**\* An organizer doesn't speak out of turn and listens carefully to others.**

Respect the thoughts of others, and develop the patience to actually listen to and think about what they are saying. Remember that the more you speak in a group setting, the less others get to speak. Men, especially, have been conditioned to interrupt and to contribute more than their share, and should be extra careful to watch for this dynamic in themselves.

**\* An organizer examines her work self-critically and asks others for criticism on how it could be better.** Critical self-awareness is a necessary prerequisite to improving your work. Fight the tendency to be defensive if someone is trying constructively to help you improve what you are doing. On the other hand, if you are giving criticism, you should be as positive and constructive as you can. Create a "criticism sandwich:" a slice of praise, followed by a slice of criticism, followed by another slice of praise.

**\* An organizer is accountable;** gives reports on work done; and keeps in contact with other members of her group by phone, mail, and personal contact. When you take on responsibilities in the name of the group, you are accountable for your actions to the other members of that group; they have a right to know everything that's being done in the group's name. In addition, your work will gain from other people's input and participation. Think of communication as the nutrient cycle flowing through the ecosystem of your group.

**\* An organizer makes an effort to involve her group in organizing beyond the local level.** By communicating and working with other groups in our own states, across the country, and around the world, we become more than just a bunch of local groups each doing its own thing; we become an interconnected and united movement that has the potential to change the whole world.

**\* An organizer studies other times and places where other organizers tried to make social change.** By learning about past struggles for change, we can learn from the past successes of others, and, equally importantly, we can avoid making the same mistakes that have been made countless times in the past. As George Santayana said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it;" so learn about how your group fits in with the long history of people's movements in this country.

**\* An organizer remains grounded in the community he or she is trying to organize;** is constantly watching, hearing and taking part in community life. By becoming a part of the community you are trying to change, you will come to understand much more about all the particularities of it and will learn much better about how actually to help change it.

Liberals always talk about "leadership" in the sense of a dichotomy--a hierarchy--between the "leader" and the "led." A true "leader" doesn't reinforce his hierarchy, but is always oriented toward empowering others and making everybody into a "leader."

\* **An organizer is patient and persistent;** don't let his or her commitment turn into self-righteousness. Don't develop the attitude that you have all the answers and that everyone else is wrong unless they listen to you. The trick is to help others learn for themselves through their own experiences. This requires patience--a great deal of it. Egotism is also very destructive. Other people can sense when you are placing yourself on a pedestal above them in your mind.

\* **An organizer speaks in a language that the people she is trying to reach can understand.** People involved in activism quickly pick up a lot of jargon that people outside of our sphere don't share. Translate your thoughts back into plain English before you speak them.

\* **An organizer realizes that social change is not made by loners or superstars, but by people working together.** Our society teaches us individualism and competition--getting ahead in the "rat race." Let's flush those attitudes down the (water-conserving) conceptual toilet where they belong. Learn about cooperation and working in a collective manner; we are here to help each other, not to compete with each other.

\* **An organizer realizes that knowing all about an issue and knowing how to organize are two very different things.** Memorizing facts and statistics is sometimes useful, but knowing the facts alone doesn't change things. We must put the knowledge of the issues together with the knowledge of what to do with it, and then put it into action.

\* **An organizer takes care of his or herself, doesn't take on too much and get burned out.** As important as the work that we are doing is, it is not so important that we should kill ourselves trying to do too much. Find a healthy, sustainable balance between the personal, social and political sides of your life. It's especially a male thing to brag about how hard you work and how much stuff you do. This can easily set up a bad dynamic of competition between people.

\* **An organizer is always educating himself or herself about sexism, racism, and homophobia.** Try as we might, we can't just eliminate these "isms" by wishing them away. We have spent all our lives in a sexist, racist and homophobic society, and these patterns are far more deeply ingrained in our psyches than we understand, or even want to understand. To undo a lifetime of oppressive patterns literally requires the rest of a lifetime of committed effort.

\* **An organizer is always teaching other people how to become organizers.** An "activist" is someone who is "active"--they go out and engage in work that has the ultimate goal of making some kind of change. An organizer, on the other hand, is always someone who is looking to get as many other people as involved in activism. This may frequently mean that you are doing things which don't seem superficially to be of maximal utility in making immediate changes, but which ultimately are vital in building the movement. An organizer, for example, will spend extra time helping someone else learn how to produce a flyer even when she can do it faster and better on her own.

As you do your organizing, think constantly about your role as an organizer and how you can be more effective at it. Think about how you can help others to learn

these same lessons. If we can get enough people doing this same thing, we can turn the world upside-down.

*Threshold* is the magazine of SEAC,  
the Student Environmental Action Coalition.  
They can be reached at:

SEAC, P.O. Box 1168,  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514-1168;  
[seac@unc.bitnet\(defunct?\)](mailto:seac@unc.bitnet(defunct?))

---

**Group Tips | WHAT IS AN ORGANIZER? | Organizing  
Basics | Effective Meetings | Ideas | Media Skills |  
Consensus**

