



# Effective grassroots organizing



Money and people are the two biggest assets an organization can have in terms of political influence. Since most nonprofit organizations and community groups do not have unlimited sums of money for lobbying, the best asset they possess is people power. The power of grassroots organizing is in the sense of justice about an issue and the power of ordinary people to influence other people in powerful positions.

Grassroots organizing works to increase the capacity of a social movement by training new leaders and by involving new activists. Leadership development helps to increase the size of the movement and to increase its power. Leaders learn a variety of skills, such as networking, running meetings, writing letters-to-the-editor. They also learn about issues, whether they be about racial justice, public education, affordable housing, clean air, or lower taxes. Eventually leaders learn how to be organizers: they learn how to pick an issue, run a campaign, and how to train new leaders.

Since the power of grassroots organizing is in

people, it seeks to mobilize large numbers. An activist group of five people may be able to reach 5,000 people in a week by putting up posters, sending e-mails, or making phone calls. Larger organizations can reach even larger amounts of people.

Grassroots organizing creates democracy. By engaging ordinary people in its campaigns, it works from the bottom up to make its decisions. It does this by working with its constituency to determine issues, strategies, and tactics, and finding leadership from the folks it is organizing.

There are many different elements to grassroots organizing, and many different schools of thought on organizing. For this section we will focus on the following topics: Direct Action Organizing and Building and Joining Coalitions. Texas Freedom Network has been trained by the Midwest Academy and is a strong believer in their model of organizing. Much of what you will see here is from their *Organizing for Social Change* manual.





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## Direct action organizing

Direct action organizing is based on three principles that give it its character and distinguish it from other forms.

**Win real, immediate concrete improvements in people's lives.** No matter what issue you are working on, you must have short-term winnable goals along the way. These wins must directly benefit people's lives. If people work in vain for prolonged periods of time they will experience burn-out.

**Give people a sense of one's own power.** Individuals do all of the work of grassroots organizing, attend all the meetings and find out all of the necessary information. By learning how to be self-reliant people become empowered.

**Alter the relationship of power.** By building a solid organization or group that is effective at carry-

ing out its work, the power dynamic gets altered. This group becomes a stakeholder that people in positions of power and influence must take into advisement before making decisions that will affect this group.

There are different types of campaigns that groups can organize around. Most common are issue campaigns. Groups often identify an issue that affects their community and begin to organize around that issue. There are many steps, however, that go into organizing an effective issue campaign. Groups must think critically and strategically about several different aspects. These aspects include: choosing an issue, developing a strategy, employing tactics that are strategic, and designing all of the actions. There are several questions related to each of these pieces. We have provided some corresponding worksheets for you to use as you identify all of these steps.



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## Building and joining coalitions

One critical aspect of organizing that is almost always encountered around issue organizing is coalitions. There are many benefits to working in coalitions, but the obvious is to amplify your reach. There are also some real considerations to take into account, however, before jumping in with both feet.

### Advantages

- *Win what couldn't be won alone.* Many issues require large numbers of people and many resources to win. Coalitions can pool people and resources to win important victories.
- *Build an ongoing power base.*
- *Increase the impact of an individual organization's efforts.* Not only does your involvement help win a campaign, but you make the work you undertake more effective.
- *Develop new leaders.* Experienced leaders can be asked to take on coalition leadership roles, thereby opening up slots for new leaders.
- *Increase resources.* If the coalition's issue is central to your organization, you may directly benefit from additional staff and money.
- *Broaden scope.* A coalition may provide the opportunity for your group to work on state or national issues, making the scope of your work more exciting and important.

### Disadvantages

- *Distracts from other work.* If the coalition issue is not your main agenda item, it can divert your time and resources.
- *Weak members can't deliver.* Organizations providing leadership and resources may get impatient with some of the weaker groups' inexperience and inability to deliver on commitments.
- *Too many compromises.* To keep the coalition together, it is often necessary to play to the least common denominator, especially on tactics.
- *Inequality of power.* The range of experience, resources, and power can create internal problems. One group, one vote does not work for groups with wide ranges of power and resources.
- *Individual organizations may not get credit.* If all activities are done in the name of the coalition, groups that contribute a lot often feel they do not get enough credit.
- *Dull tactics.* Groups that like more confrontational, highly visible tactics may feel that the more subdued tactics of a coalition are not exciting enough to activate their members.

### \*TFN Tip\*

Help coalition partners maintain open and honest relationships with each other. Each partner may have its own core needs for building its organization. That's OK. Knowing those needs can help all partners work more smoothly together so that all organizations benefit while accomplishing the primary coalition goal.