

How to Have Organizing Conversations



Phyllis Pearson

What is an organizing conversation?

An organizing conversation: a conversation aimed at getting someone to do something.

What is an organizing conversation

What are we trying to get the person to do?

In many cases: **sign a card!**

But not all cases! You can have an organizing conversation to achieve any goal you like.

On this campaign, **when might we need to have organizing conversations where the aim isn't to have someone sign a card?**

How can I get someone to do something, as a result of a conversation??

“Your job as an organizer was to find out what it was that people wanted to be different in their lives, and then to persuade people that it mattered whether they decided to do something about it. This is not the same thing as persuading people that the thing itself matters: they usually know it does. **The task is to persuade people that *they* matter: they know they usually don’t.**”

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Semantics for Organizing

- You don't want someone to leave the conversation seeing themselves as in need of services from the union.
- You want them to see themselves as having to do something in order to get the thing they want.
- **Words/phrases to reach for** : you, you and your colleagues, great work!
- **Words/phrases to avoid**: we, *the union*, thank you

Examples from your worksheets

7.

Bad = There's lots of benefits to being a union member, you can call our number when you get in trouble, including for legal representation.

Better =

8.

Bad = The union fights for better pay and working conditions for you!

Better =

Structure

1) Introduction

- Introduce yourself!

2) Issues and Agitation

- Get them fired up!

3) Education

- Frame your ask as a solution to their frustrations.

4) Call the Question

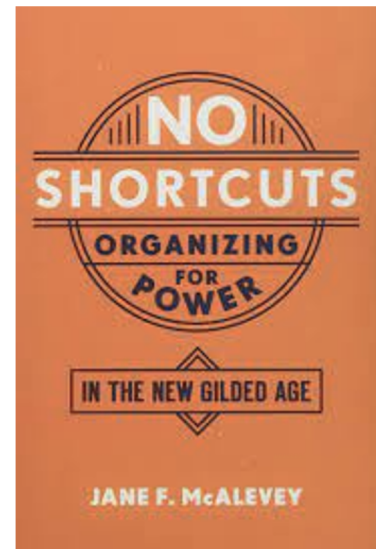
- Make your ask. Wait for an answer. Even if it's painful.

5) Inoculation

- Prepare them for the worst so it doesn't scare them later!

6) Follow-up

- Maintain the relationship and keep good notes!



Structure

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- Introduce yourself! Make use of personal connections.

2) Issues and Agitation

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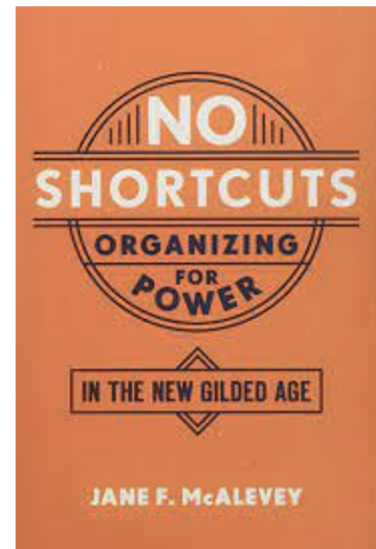
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Step 2: Issues and Agitation

- This is arguably the most important step of the conversation.
- Get them talking about what frustrates them about their workplace.
- Do not assume you know their issues.
- Aim for **70/30** listening to speaking ratio!
- Goal is to agitate until they say “*what do we do about it ?!?*”

Step 2: Issues and Agitation

Example questions:

- **Do you enjoy working in your lab/as an RA?**
- **What is your experience working in your lab/as an RA?**
- **Do your colleagues feel the same?**
- Are you also a TA? Is your experience as a TA similar?
- What effect does your job as an RA have on your life/ your family's life?
- **Is your salary enough to live in Vancouver?**
- **That sounds frustrating! Do you ever feel frustrated?**
- What issues do you care about the most?
- How did you feel when....
- How do you feel about....
- **You mentioned X, can you tell me more about that?**

Step 3: Education

- Don't just tell them facts - frame these facts as a solution to the issues you uncovered from step 2.
- **Lean on the fact that TAs are unionized and the protections we have in that collective agreement**
- Don't promise things. Instead, outline the path forward to solving their issues.
- If you get a question you don't know the answer to, that's ok! Tell them you don't know, but you can find out for them.
- The FAQ on our website is your friend!

Step 4: Call the question

Recall: Organizing conversations are conversations aimed at getting someone to do something.

Frame the thing you want them to do as a question of the form: “Will you X?”

E.g. “Will you sign a card?” “Will you speak to your lab mates about signing?” “Will you come to coordinating committee?”

Step 4: Call the Question

“An axiom of organizers,” writes Jane McAlevey, “is that every good organizing conversation makes everyone at least a little uncomfortable.” The most awkward part is what McAlevey calls “the long uncomfortable silence”—the moment when you make an ask and let someone think about their answer. (...) Too often I tried to **gloss over the discomfort instead of letting it sit.** (...) As a result, **people saw me as the union person who would deliver information and lay out a plan and keep them posted;** they did not see themselves as union people who were also responsible for helping to win the things they said they wanted. McAlevey would call this a shortcut; we called it **protecting people from the organizing.** To soften the ask seems compassionate, but like any other protective measure, it condescends, and **like any other shortcut, it makes things harder in the long run.**”

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Step 5: Inoculation

Some common worries you can inoculate against:

- Retaliation from their supervisor
- Taxes
- Striking
- Changing their relationship to their supervisor
- Fear regarding their department's finances (e.g. having to cut positions/ not being able to hire)
- Re-sign a card (6 month validity)

Final tip:

Before we practice, take some time to consider the following two questions:

1. Why did you want to work on this campaign?
2. How did you get involved in the campaign?

Final tip:

Before we practice, take some time to consider the following two questions:

1. Why did you want to work on this campaign?
2. How did you get involved in the campaign?
 - For most people, their answer is: someone asked them to get involved.
 - Note that if this is true for you, it means: someone organized you!!
 - Reflect on what they did and why it worked, and use these insights in your own organizing!

Why I organize:

“I liked who I was when I put myself out there with other people again and again. I was braver and kinder, more generous and more confident. I wanted to live in a world where my voice mattered, where I could see the people around me as comrades instead of competitors. The union was imperfect in ways that I knew as well as anyone, but it was the closest I had come to that kind of world.”

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Time to practice!

“Organizing requires you to learn the language of politics so well that it becomes your own. Like any other language, it takes a lot of practice, during which time you often feel awkward and unsure. (...) But eventually you learn to leave this scaffolding behind and speak as yourself.”

So let's get practicing!! :)

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