

Chapter 25

Organizational Measures

A central message of this book – in the historical chapters as well as in those focused on current conditions – is that organization is necessary to bring about change in society. It is good for people to join with others in trade unions, community organizations, service groups, or wherever else folks are working to improve themselves and society. And where no organizations exist, people can form their own. Gaining experience working collectively with others is a skill that folks have to learn mainly on their own, since the society provides little training in organizing skills. Once people recognize that social change requires collective action, then the question of what kinds of organization and how they should function becomes important. Here we want to address some of these questions as they relate to the struggle against white supremacy and racism.

Enabling personal development

One way organizations can advance the struggle is to foster the kinds of personal engagement outlined in the preceding chapter. For example,

- **Develop awareness of privilege and internalized oppression.** An organization can hold a workshop – at a conference, for example – that deals with racial privilege and brings in gender and class in appropriate ways. Another possibility is to offer a training program to the organization’s members – such as a workshop by the People’s Institute’s (“Undoing Racism”) or the Catalyst Project (“Anti-Racism for Collective Liberation”). Also, valuable training resources are available at the “Challenging White Supremacy Workshop” website, <http://cwsworkshop.org/workshops.html>.

- **Build relationships across the color line.** A group can prioritize outreach and recruitment – and conduct the kinds of discussions internally that will prepare people to be successful in this effort. Such activities help achieve the goal of transforming the composition, consciousness, and culture of movement organizations – as discussed in Chapter 23.
- **Study and discuss the history of peoples of color, as well as of white working class people.** Organizations can conduct internal studies, hold forums and film showings for the broader community, and generally encourage a culture of discovery. Popular education methods can decrease the dependence on written materials – by using music, role-playing, video clips, and exercises that get folks physically engaged with a topic.¹ Educational methods should take into account people’s range of abilities and learning skills so that people do not feel excluded. And in a multilingual setting, having appropriate written materials, as well as translators and translation equipment, are essential.

For each of the other personal activities suggested in Chapter 24, similar organizational implications follow:

- **Encourage folks to talk about their personal experiences involving race, class, and gender.** Such shared lessons are an effective approach to learning, since they are so direct and personal in their impact.
- **Engage the group in carrying out an inventory of community activism and area workplaces.** Such a project can encourage members to be intentional about where they live and work, and about their outreach efforts and the activities they engage in. Where organizational resources are available, it may be possible – and necessary – to provide financial support to folks who move into new areas or take on new jobs that include a step-down in pay. Such considerations are important when implementing a strategic plan like “Organize the South and Southwest,” which calls for folks to move to the Sunbelt and to be strategic in considering where to settle and what jobs to take.

¹ Two examples: “Step forward, step back” helps a group of people become aware of who is in the room – “Step forward if you’ve experienced real hunger; step back if both parents went to college.” The “Ten Chairs” activity, developed by United for a Fair Economy, assigns people to sit on chairs representing equal divisions of the national wealth based on who owns how much of that wealth. Most people end up crowded onto the last few chairs.

- **Develop a supportive internal culture.** Recognize people's varying needs – related to their different languages, different stages of life, different family responsibilities, and different types of personal relationships. The culture can also encourage timeliness, good practices around personal organization and communication, and a friendly, direct approach to resolving contradictions.
- **Encourage openness to new people.** By recognizing the validity of everyday interactions as a form of social struggle, an organization can counsel patience in handling disagreements with other people. The overall weakness of the social justice movement in the early 21st Century brings with it an often unrecognized benefit. It requires activists to learn how to talk to people who may disagree with them. Discovering areas of unity and keeping them primary, while clarifying and managing differences, is an important skill for activists and organizations to develop.

Internal processes

We now want to focus on aspects of internal functioning that can help an organization 1) achieve transformation goals around race, gender, and class (see Chapter 23); and 2) prefigure the type of society the movement seeks to bring about:

1) Take affirmative action to select and develop leaders. Affirmative action helps demonstrate an organization's commitment to internal transformation. Quotas or separate candidate lists are two mechanisms that can be used to elect leadership – as is bringing additional people onto the leadership body to balance out its representation. Who chairs meetings, who leads in planning major events, and who the presenters are in workshops – all are examples of leadership roles that deserve such attention.

Along with a commitment to filling positions of influence in an organization comes the need to first develop people's leadership skills. In their absence, folks get set up to fail by being pushed too far too fast – or they end up as figureheads for others in the group with the real power. Affirmative action to promote leaders of color, women, LGBTQ, and working class folks works its way back through leadership development to the recruitment priorities of the organization. To develop new leaders, the organization must assure that new people join who can become part of the process. At the same time, having leaders who are representative of a strategic constituency assists in recruitment – by providing a public face that folks can identify with, by helping to

shape a welcoming internal culture, and by serving as mentors for new people coming in.

2) Promote a culture of planning and evaluation. By developing plans for campaigns or for periods of a year or more, and then by regularly evaluating the work, the group can systematically pay attention to recruitment, retention, and leadership development. Such planning and evaluation skills can also carry over into members' lives as well, helping people to be more focused and productive in their work.

3) Encourage a climate of directness in dealing with contradictions that arise. Group processes benefit by having a round of comments at the end of each meeting to evaluate how the discussion went. If there is a commitment to overcoming divisions around race, gender, and class, comments can address behavior that others find annoying or offensive: catch phrases that may have a racist connotation; people who tend to speak too long or too often – often men; or conversations that assume a certain level of education or a male-female pattern of socializing.

A person who says or does things that are offensive in a group usually is not conscious of their impact on others. If the actions were intentional, the person probably would not be in the group to begin with. For the benefit of the person being criticized, as well as to make the space safe for whoever is raising the criticism, there needs to be a group norm that people first listen to criticism – and not jump to an immediate defense. If in a group setting, others can help clarify points and provide a social cushion to support the process of listening and reflection. Over time, differences can then be resolved in the course of working together to achieve common goals. If a climate that allows direct criticism does not exist, then patterns of behavior by white folks, for example, are likely to drive people of color out of the organization. And similar dynamics can take their toll on women, as well as working class and LGBTQ folks.

It should be noted, however, that no one should accept criticisms that are not on target. Criticism can be very helpful – after all, who wants to go around offending or annoying people you want to work closely with. But people need to make up their own minds – using their own judgment after taking into account everything that others are saying. Simply giving in to group pressures undermines the integrity of the whole organization.

4) Pay attention to group dynamics. Since so much of what people do is shaped by the dominant culture, it can be helpful to pay attention to the organization's dynamics – who speaks too much, who gets up and moves around and when, who makes a face or shakes their head when another person is speaking. These patterns may sound nit-picky, or they might simply reflect personal mannerisms. But people from dominant

groupings have a way of unconsciously throwing their weight around; and such patterns of behavior should be brought to group consciousness. People who are standing can add a sense of importance to their words. Making a face can undermine what another person is saying – just as nodding can either indicate support, or turn the speaker into a mouthpiece for the person nodding. Someone may pay close attention to one speaker – to a man, say, or a leading person in the group – and then get up, move around, or leave the room for another.

One way to deal with these kinds of behaviors is to have a “process monitor” assigned to keep track of who talks, who’s listening, and whatever other little tricks, if any, people may be pulling to dominate, or ignore, the discussion. Other ways to assure a balanced conversation, especially in a large group with limited time, are:

- After a man has spoken, wait a little while before recognizing another male speaker. By providing some space, people who are reluctant to jump into a conversation may find themselves willing to speak.
- From time to time invite those in the group who have not spoken to express themselves, if they so choose.
- Go around the room one by one, with folks having the option to pass if they like and then allowing them another chance after the circuit is complete.
- Have a rule that no one speaks twice before everyone has spoken once – or at least has had the opportunity to speak.

These kinds of structured practices can be very empowering to folks who are not skilled at speaking, or who are a minority of one kind or another in the room. And the group benefits by hearing from everyone – and not just from the college-educated or other more skilled speakers. Needless to say, however, going overboard on dynamics should be avoided, as with any group activity taken to excess. The goal is not the process itself, but the full contribution of everyone in the room to the group’s mission.

5) Provide space for caucuses based on race or nationality, gender, sexuality, and class. People in the socially oppressed grouping can decide if there is a need for a caucus or not. Caucuses should meet at a convenient time and place; and ally groupings should meet at the same time. These two provisos help assure that the caucuses are not just for show and that the whole organization focuses on the concerns of the affected groups. Issues that come up within the caucuses and ally groupings can then be brought before the whole organization for consideration.

Caucuses make possible a collective process to work through differences inside the organization. It might be difficult for an individual to raise criticisms 1) of someone with standing in the group, 2) of a man, where the person affected is a woman, or 3) of a person who does not take criticism well. In such situations the support and affirmation of other people of color, or other women, can be crucial in clearing up a problem. Similarly if the matter concerns a more general cultural practice or leadership style, a collective recommendation can more quickly get to the bottom of the situation than a single voice.

6) Learn how to contain differences within the organization.

Discussion and debate are essential to a group's learning process and to its ability to adapt to new conditions. At the same time, differences of opinion can sometimes lead to hard feelings, can turn off new people, and can result in internal divisions, inaction, and even the splitting or destruction of an organization. Being able to contain and work through differences over time is critical to an organization's vitality. The problem is that U.S. society encourages people to dream of liberation in the form of owning their own small business or becoming a professional. Managing differences so as to build large, democratic organizations capable of transforming society, by contrast, is not a skill supported by the power structure.

Corporations and the military have a chain of command to assure unity of action. And trade unions in the United States have often functioned in a similar fashion, with entrenched leadership using the call to be a "team player" as an excuse to silence opposition. Movement organizations aspire to function democratically, but unfortunately there are very few models of effective organizations to look to. The experience of socialism in power during the 20th Century too often turned "democratic centralism" into democracy for the elite and centralism for everyone else. The result of this situation is that the movement in the United States has a long way to go to discover and implement forms of organization that are both democratic and able to function effectively on a large scale.

The inability to manage both aspects of this contradiction undermines the fight against white supremacy. Internal debate is crucial; but hair-splitting and setting up multiple competing organizations is a dead end for the struggle. Grassroots folks – working class people of all nationalities – have little patience for this kind of "small business" mentality, where every so-called leader wants to lord it over a private movement fiefdom.

Here are a few organizational measures to help deal with this concern:

- **Minimize the fundamental questions** that everyone in an organization either agrees to or agrees to live with. These “bottom lines” should be as inclusive as possible while still upholding the defining aspects of the movement – the central importance of opposing white supremacy being one such example.
 - **Speak in terms of “themes”** that characterize a period rather than micro-specifying the fine details of the organization’s official position. Having folks oriented to a theme – like “opposing empire,” for example – allows them to carry out work that is true to the conditions where they live and work, while still fitting in with the organization’s overall perspective.
 - **Be willing to trust the group process – up to a point.** There is a balance between the individual and the group, and between a single organization and a group of organizations. No one has total insight into reality; so even if an organization gets something wrong, there needs to be patience and trust that in time everyone will learn from the experience. If the group persists in its wrong direction, people can still look for ways to disassociate themselves while maintaining unity around central questions. The ultimate authority for decisions must be a person’s own judgment – but informed, as much as possible, by an all-sided openness to what grassroots voices are saying.
 - **Prevent individuals from becoming entrenched in leadership.** There is a balance, too, between continuity of leadership and an organization’s ability to be flexible and adapt to changing conditions. As much as possible an organization should strive for 1) a collective, or group, leadership with input from many sources; and 2) the movement of individuals in and out of leadership positions, so that people do not become rooted in place. Term limits of some kind can encourage two things: First, they compel the organization to bring forward new leaders to fill the positions left open by people rotating out. And, second, the former leaders bring to their status as rank and file members their knowledge of how the organization works. They can share this understanding and be a force for greater participation by ordinary members in groupwide decision-making.
- 7) **Don’t overlook questions of security.** It may seem strange to speak of security concerns, since everything we have mentioned here is legal and above board. Unfortunately, however, history shows that legality and a righteous cause have not been enough to prevent violent attacks of either the official or unofficial kind in the United States. From the original Klu Klux Klan and White Leagues at the end of the Civil War,

through the Palmer Raids after World War I, the McCarthy attacks on the trade unions after World War II, and the FBI's COINTELPRO program during the 1960s and '70s – the United States has consistently suppressed movements that fundamentally challenge the status quo.

Recognizing this history and taking into account the relative vulnerability of the sectors of people involved – people who historically have been lynched, deported, beaten, raped, and murdered – require that the movement be serious about protecting its own. Most basically this obligation calls for organizing that is both broad and deep, so that large numbers of people can be brought out to defend anyone who comes under attack. It also means taking precautions so that the movement's campaigns, organizations, and membership are transparent to people at the base, while being obscured from forces who want to destroy the movement. In particular, people's jobs need to be protected from reprisals. And tactics should take into account the higher vulnerability of people of color, women, lower sector workers, and LGBTQ folks to police and reactionary violence.

Security is an underrated area of concern for the social justice movement. This situation reflects, in part, the overall weakness of the movement, as well as its rightful primary focus on organizing and mobilization. Nonetheless, having a mindset that looks reality square in the face requires that people recognize the deeply violent character of the U.S. social system – and that the victims of that violence are distributed unequally, depending on race, gender, and class.

There are many other aspects of organizational life that are worth paying attention to as part of developing new, more direct, and open ways of relating to one another. For example, there are:

- *decision making processes* that draw on consensus, voting, and a mix of both
- *communication practices and etiquette* around phone calling vs. email and hard copies
- *methods of summing up* and otherwise processing the group's experience
- *balancing formal activities* and the informal life of the group
- *balancing individuals' organizational life* with their lives at home and at work
- *providing mutual support* – be it emotional, financial, or general mentoring

Too often people do not realize all that is involved in building an organization, and they tend to fall back on ingrained habits combined with unrealistic expectations of other people. Just as with raising

children, however, most people eventually figure out how to do it, and they get better with practice. Being basically friendly, listening well, and paying attention to detail will get a person a long way.

We have highlighted points that can help an organization be both effective and internally consistent in its struggle against white supremacy. The aim is for people to look squarely at this essential task and not to lose heart when troubles crop up. We also want to encourage organizations in the social justice movement to share their experiences in organization building. That way a collective expertise in time can emerge to help sustain a variety of influential democratic organizations, anchored in the grassroots freedom movements.