



# Taking It On: Starting to Build Power

## A SEAT AT THE TABLE

In 1992 it looks as though the Democrats have their first chance in twelve years to regain the presidency of the United States. Bill Clinton, a moderate governor from the state of Arkansas, is the Democrats' presumptive nominee to face an increasingly unpopular incumbent, George H. W. Bush. One of Clinton's promises to voters is that he will "end welfare as we know it," a rallying cry to conservatives in both parties. Joan and Paul meet for the first time when we join with a group of other activists and service providers to organize an action at the Democratic Convention in our home city of New York. The goal of this action is to show Clinton and the Democrats that this cannot be the campaign centerpiece. In planning this action we deepen our commitment to a key principle that we believe is essential to building community power: constituents and community members need to be in control.

Our group plans to close all of the soup kitchens and emergency food programs in New York City. We plan to direct people instead to get their meals that day at a huge soup kitchen at the convention. We reason that this will dramatically communicate the effects of welfare cuts and stand out in the array of convention protests by various interest groups.

This plan takes shape until Anita Adams comes to one of the organizing meetings. Anita and her children live at the Brooklyn Arms, a notoriously mismanaged, abusive welfare hotel in Brooklyn. Many of us know about Anita's work as the leader of an organizing campaign to make improvements at the hotel and ultimately, to shut it down. Anita comes to the meeting because she has heard rumors of the plan to close the kitchens and the pantries. She is incensed: What does a group of white advocates think we are doing *for* poor women of color and their children?

She derides us not so much for the plan as for not including poor women in the planning process: How could we take such a drastic measure without bothering to ask people in the community how it will affect them?

Anita is confrontational in the best possible way. She agitates our group. She makes us uncomfortable so we will think about what we are doing and move to a different form of action.

We change our plan. Anita works with us to bring low-income people to the convention by offering political education, providing transportation to the site, and giving them roles in the action. Although these had all been elements in the planning prior to Anita's involvement, they would have been rendered completely meaningless by coercing people to come by shutting down their emergency food services.

As the two of us move on to start an organization, Community Voices Heard (CVH), in order to address the same concerns that activated us at the '92 convention, we draw from many organizing experiences.

But we have both heard Anita Adams's call to action loud and clear: work *with* people, don't do *for* them.

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## How Do We Get Started?

*You find partners and get to work.*

We started organizing together in the 1990s out of outrage and a belief that through collective action we could make a difference. We found in each other, and our colleague Gail Aska, potential partners for doing something constructive and necessary to fight back against policies to reform the welfare system in the United States that we knew would be devastating. We started talking about the need to bring the people who would be most affected by welfare reform to the table with decision makers. No one else was organizing this constituency in New York City and many thought it would be impossible to do so. From our experiences of organizing other low-income constituencies, we believed it was critical to try.

Here we describe how we started building CVH. For your situation you may need to move at a different pace or implement the steps in some other ways. However, we offer our experience as an example to show that if you want to build the power to make sure that you not only get what you want, but you do so in a way that is resilient in the face of opposing interests, you do not just start engaging in action. You proceed intentionally.

*Step One: Go out and talk to people.* Before we did anything else, we conducted more than fifty one-on-one meetings with a variety of people. We met with organizers who had organized low-income people in the past; service providers who provided services to women and children; advocates with national, state, and local organizations; funders; religious leaders; union leaders; and well-established and powerful local organizing networks. We also included some key constituent leaders we had heard of or whom we met at meetings in the community, most of whom were engaged in some form of activism in a service organization.

In these meetings we asked the following questions:

- Are you addressing problems with welfare reform?
- If so, how? For instance, by providing services, pursuing legal strategies, or engaging in advocacy? (For more on different approaches to addressing community problems see Resource E.)
- We're thinking about trying to organize to bring welfare recipients more firmly into the welfare reform debate. Are you or anyone else you know doing this?
- Do you think what we want to do is needed? Why or why not?
- What are your questions for us?
- If we move forward, how would you support us or get involved?
- Who else should we talk with?

Although the investment in time was substantial—we did these meetings over the course of about ten weeks—it was essential for our success. We learned that no one else was doing what we planned. We learned about the politics surrounding welfare reform and the potential challenges and opportunities we faced. Although some people encouraged us, many told us we were crazy. We had one meeting, for example, with a professor and respected activist on welfare issues whom Joan particularly admired. We were eager to get her perspective—expecting to hear enthusiasm and get important contacts. Instead, we sat cramped in her office while she literally blew cigarette smoke in our faces, dismissed our ideas, and ended the meeting early when someone else came to her door. We left and stood, stunned, in the hallway. Rather than walking away dejected after this and similar experiences, we tapped into our anger. And since the situation was so ridiculous, we had to laugh. We kept reminding ourselves that we believed in what we were doing. We started to

build relationships with organizations and individuals who were with us and who we would call on later. Tool 1.1 at the end of this chapter offers a sample phone rap to schedule these meetings and Tool 1.2 provides a guide for conducting them.

*Step Two: Identify an initial organizing committee.* Once we knew that no one was organizing people on welfare, we began the real work of building an organizing committee. We started to meet welfare recipients. Because changes in welfare would affect women and children most of all, we reached out to these constituents, a term meaning the people directly affected by the problem we wanted to address. We conducted “Welfare Reform Teach-Ins” in community organizations that served mothers on welfare. These teach-ins educated women about their rights, given the proposed changes. We asked how they would reform the welfare system. We did civics education about how they could affect policy making. We spread information, built a list of people we could engage, and learned who had “fire in the belly” to organize.

Not everyone we met and invested in turned out to be a leader. For months we worked closely with Cynthia, a low-income woman active in social justice campaigns in the city. We thought she had potential to be a great leader and eventually a staff organizer. When it turned out that her life circumstances would not allow this level of involvement, it was very difficult for her and for us to face.

Around this time, we also met Gail, and she and we moved forward together.

#### **Gail Aska—CVH Cofounder**

When Gail was pushed out of her job as a data entry supervisor by a United States economy driven by corporate downsizing, like many other single mothers, she needed support. She and her son lived in a New York City shelter for a short time and received welfare benefits. At a local family services center, she formed Sister Circle, a self-help group of mothers. They were aware that something dramatic was unfolding politically and that they were at the center of it. Gail moved them to action. “Let’s get out of the house and see what everyone is talking about,” she told them. “Cutting us off welfare, [putting our children in] orphanages. I was angry and upset, and [I] wanted to get women involved in something.” When Paul met Gail at a meeting of welfare rights advocates, Gail had just moved to an apartment and was ready to start organizing.

“When I got involved with Paul, we worked to educate, educate, educate—not about welfare rights, but about who has power,” Gail said. After meeting with Gail’s group, Paul invited the participants to a full-day organizing meeting that he and Joan were organizing with other advocates, organizers, and people on welfare. At that meeting, Gail stood out. She sat in the middle of her group. She didn’t raise her voice or wave a fist, but when she spoke, everyone listened. She was a presence. She was angry, but a hearty smile was her most prominent expression. She was hopeful. She could imagine and see a better way and draw people into believing in that vision too.

From that day, we moved forward with Gail as partners in starting CVH. Gail became the chair of the board of our new organization. Her leadership was grounded in her direct experience, especially her resentment of the lack of respect given to women, particularly women of color, who were on welfare. “They didn’t know the power they had, the power they possessed,” she said of the women. “We kind of pulled that out of them, we showed them they had power and you have to learn how to use it.”

Gail often recalled how frequently others in the welfare-reform fray told us that we would never be able to organize low-income people effectively. The fact that we eventually built a base and won real legislative and administrative changes was a source of tremendous satisfaction for her. “I think we showed them exactly what we could do,” she said. “Nothing is more dangerous than an angry mother,” she liked to say, with a smile, of course.

Gail became a great public speaker. She first addressed public officials and the media in her role as a leader. Later, she became a CVH staff member and continued to speak out to a different audience of CVH funders and allies. She helped train members of CVH to step up and be heard. Guided by her desire to bring respect to women on welfare, the welcoming, family-like nature of the organization is another product of her steadfast vision. Gail died in 2005 of complications from diabetes. In her journey from the shelter system to the halls of power, she helped to build a political institution of low-income people.\*

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\*Quotations are from an interview conducted for the New York Foundation, used by permission of the foundation.

*Step Three: Make a proposal for power.* We engaged in deep discourse about the politics surrounding welfare reform with the women we were meeting. We agitated them, asking why they thought people considered them lazy or believed they didn't want to work. If they had solutions to fix welfare, why would no one listen to them? We asked people outright: Do you want to build power with other people in the same situation as you are in so policymakers will listen to you? We found women who did. They wanted to organize, and they wanted to build an organization.

*Step Four: Develop principles.* Once we identified about twenty people who wanted to form a core group, we began to discuss what the organization would look like and how it would operate. Because we had been building relationships and trust, we could have honest conversations. We considered various approaches. We agreed that the low-income leaders would represent the organization publicly, make decisions about what it would do, be the majority of its board of directors, and hold each other accountable for their actions on the organization's behalf.

*Step Five: Kick it off—engage the broader community.* We did not move forward with just the desire and buy-in of twenty people. Working with this core group as well as some advocates and staff from service groups, we held a series of meetings over the course of five months and met with more than five hundred mothers on welfare. Their resounding response was, "Yes. We want to build our power." Tool 1.3, Six Ss for a Successful Meeting, provides a template for holding meetings that get results.

*Step Six: Train an organizing committee.* By now people had come in through three ways: the personal networks of original leaders like Gail; referrals from other organizations that worked with welfare recipients, making our initial research meetings pay off; and teach-ins and some initial, small direct actions.

We identified the twenty-five best potential leaders and brought them to a three-day training about one thing: power. Organizers from the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) network conducted the training. We raised money so that the women could bring their children to the training and have good child care while they did their work. We went to a nice, comfortable retreat center. We set a culture of respect. The women reached a shared understanding about the purpose of the organization while deepening their relationships with us and with one another. Many who attended the training went on to play significant roles in the organization.

*Step Seven: Establish a leadership team.* We established a leadership team to manage the building of the organization; most of those on the team had attended the

power training. (See the next section for an example of how to establish a leadership team.)

*Step Eight: Ramp up the work.* A wider group of members began to work together more effectively and got more focused. They met regularly and clarified and agreed on goals and objectives. The leadership team oversaw those of us who were playing staff roles. The group engaged in more significant actions, including marches in the state capital with hundreds of people. In one dramatic action, one of our core leaders, surrounded by two hundred people, posted an eviction notice on the door to the governor's office to dramatize the effects of his proposals to cut the state welfare budget. We also brought mothers on welfare to the nation's capital to talk directly to their elected representatives. These women were, in some cases, the first actual welfare recipients that architects of welfare reform or their key staff had ever talked with. Exercise 1.1 at the end of the chapter offers a way to help a group of people begin to see what they want to accomplish together. Exercise 1.2 offers some questions to guide a discussion of how to move forward.

### **What Is a Leadership Team and What Does It Do?**

*A leadership team is the group of people at the core of the organization who make key decisions about campaigns and the development of the organization. They represent the organization publicly and help raise money to support it. You can also establish a leadership team for a specific campaign.*

The leadership team has a core and a shape, but it is not static. While you start out with a fairly defined team of leaders, the team evolves over the life of the organization. These leaders have a variety of skills and qualities. If all the leaders of the organization just want to do actions, then the organization is perpetually in action, but not necessarily effective. If the core leaders are always analyzing things, then the organization may never move to action.

In some organizations the leadership team and the board or steering committee are the same group. In other cases, the organization decentralizes leadership responsibilities throughout the organization, with leadership teams for specific campaigns running at the same time.

The following story shows how we built the initial leadership team at CVH:

Paul met Gail at a meeting of welfare advocates. At that meeting, Gail introduced Paul to her friend Phyllis, a member of Sister Circle. A few weeks later, Gail brought Phyllis and her longtime friend Dina, also active in Sister Circle, to an

organizing meeting that we convened with other activists and service providers. Through doing welfare reform teach-ins, we met Karen, a low-income mother who wanted to organize and who said she would try to get her friend Betsy involved too. We also met Janet, a college student who relied on welfare to raise her two young sons, and Laura, who needed a range of benefits to care for her school-aged daughter who had some health concerns. Janet and Laura were frustrated that women on welfare did not have a voice in the organizations where they'd been going to find out about welfare reform.

Working along with Gail, we convened a series of initial meetings to talk about starting an organization. Phyllis, Dina, Karen, Betsy, Janet, and Laura regularly attended. We were impressed by the different strengths these women brought, and we worked with them to develop their leadership skills (see Chapter Five for more on developing leaders). Their different strengths served the organization well over time:

- *Vision.* Gail was both a visionary and caretaking leader who kept the focus on gaining respect for women on welfare while fostering a sense of family in the emerging organization. She became a presence at the office, took leadership in meetings, and personally motivated other women who felt powerless to come out and get involved.
- *Recruitment.* Laura recruited other students on welfare to join us.
- *Facilitation.* Dina moved us to make decisions and regularly chaired meetings.
- *Agitation.* Karen challenged others to step up to responsibilities and also confronted public officials and other people with power in our direct actions.
- *Involvement.* Phyllis made phone calls to turn people out for meetings and actions.
- *Representation.* Betsy often represented the group at community meetings and conferences.
- *Relationship-building.* Janet built relationships between us and the more established organizations in which she participated. Janet was the one to place the eviction notice on the Governor's door.

When we created a formal organization, these women became the board of directors.



As CVH gained power and expanded its work, the leadership team decided to recruit some allies with professional skills to join them on the board. The leadership team gave the board specific powers and responsibilities while decentralizing decision making throughout the organization. They created organizing committees to direct the course of individual campaigns.

Because of the nature of the issues we were addressing, many of the leaders in the early days of our organization had frequent life-changing circumstances. While we retained a solid core, Paul and the other organizers we hired were continually building our leadership team, bringing out the capacity of individuals and helping them function effectively as a team.

A leadership team is not an insider club. It is a group of people who consistently have the time and space in their lives to build power and make a difference—which is often a challenge in the intense period of starting an organization. In order for the team to be effective, the members need to challenge each other and at times themselves to take on different responsibilities, change roles, and make room for newer leaders to participate and develop.

### **Do We Have to Create an Organization in Order to Build Power?**

*In order to achieve a true shift in power, you often need not only to win a campaign but to establish an organization. You can, however, use power-building techniques to win free-standing campaigns that make a real difference in people's lives.*

We built an organization because that's what people directly affected by the issues wanted, and we agreed with them. Member-led organizations like CVH become community institutions for political engagement. They are essential for creating substantive, long-lasting, radical change. These organizations continue a long tradition in the United States of making democracy work.

From the beginning, the women we were organizing were clear that they wanted an organization, not just a single campaign. They wanted an organization that followed the following organizing principles:

- *Power.* They wanted to build an organization with as many members as possible that would represent their interests, not only on welfare reform but also on other issues, such as job creation, education and training for jobs, and improving their children's schools.

- *Action.* They wanted to directly engage and negotiate with powerholders and were willing to be confrontational, if necessary.
- *Self-Determination.* They were clear that they needed to build, manage, and represent the organization. They did not want to cede these roles to staff or to professional advocates.
- *Shift the parameters of the debate.* They did not want to talk about minor improvements in policies. They wanted to shift the public and political debate to include what they believed would make a real difference in their lives.

These core principles were central to the development of Community Voices Heard over the next decade and beyond. We believe these are critical for all community power-building organizations. In addition, the original CVH leaders explicitly wanted an inclusive organization for all people on welfare—all ages, racial and ethnic groups, and personal circumstances. Clarity about who the organization is for is a critical early decision.

Most of what we describe in this book assumes the resources and goals of an organization because ultimately, organizations consolidate and perpetuate community power.

### **Should We Build an Organization to Address Our Issue?**

*This decision is both personal and collective. The following general questions can help guide you.*

*Do I (or we) have the appetite to engage in organization-building?* It takes hard work, a lot of time, and financial resources to build an organization. It can be extremely rewarding and lead to very real and important changes, but you need to be hungry for it, not doing it because you feel that you “should.”

*How complex is the problem?* It is important to understand the difference between a problem and an issue. Although people often use the term “issue” very broadly, we use it in a specific way throughout this book. An issue is a solution to a problem. For example, for us, the attack on welfare policy was a problem. It took some time to identify the initial solution women on welfare wanted to pursue—stop the governor from cutting welfare programs in New York State. (For more information about the difference between problems and issues and how to identify issues, see Chapter Seven.) As in our case, you may need to build an organization if the problem has many fronts and the solutions are complicated. For example,

we eventually had to define and pursue issues on the local, state, and federal levels in order to have a real impact on the problem of the destruction of the welfare system.

Sometimes you can resolve a problem with a free-standing campaign. For instance, a developer wants to destroy your local park to build luxury housing. People in the community clearly define their issue: save the park. As we lay out in Part Three, you initiate a campaign to achieve your goal, a lot of people from the community get involved, and you win. Whether or not this victory will ultimately save the park depends on how intense the development pressure is in your community. Will another developer come along shortly and try the same thing? Even problems that seem relatively easy to solve can recur if you don't address the root causes.

*Is another community organizing group working on the problem?* Take the time to meet with people to find out if anyone else is addressing what you want to address with the same constituency. If someone is, it does not necessarily mean you should not. It does mean that you need to find out more and make an assessment about the effectiveness of others' efforts. Knowing who else is working on the problem not only gives you information about whether or not you need an organization, it also shows people that you are serious, strategic, and respectful of the community and its leaders, especially if you are from outside of the community.

*Is the issue winnable?* It is hard to build an organization around something the community cannot win, even if people feel passionately that it is the solution to their problem. (For more on determining if the issue is winnable, see Chapter Seven.)

*Do the people affected by the problem want an organization?* Do community members say they want an organization? If so, do they come out over a sustained period of time to build one? If people meet consistently and follow through on their commitments, there is some potential that they are ready for an organization. You don't need thousands of people to start, but you do need a core group of leaders and people moving to action.

*Are there resources to address the issue?* Are individuals and foundations willing to give you money to pay for staff, travel, mailings, and a full range of expenses? If you run a campaign, then disband, you are more able to get by with volunteers serving as organizers and people contributing goods and services. If you decide to build an organization, you need to raise money. See Resource B for more on raising money for organizing.

## How Soon Do We Need to Establish a Structure and Raise Money?

*You need some internal structure early on, but do not get bogged down.*

In starting CVH, we kept our initial fundraising and approach to management simple. We began as a project of the advocacy organization Paul worked for, which gave us office space and some staff support. We did not focus on hiring more staff; instead we cultivated the skills and commitment of the constituent leaders. Work got done, and it solidified their engagement—they saw that what they did made a real difference. As we ramped it up, we raised money and established some management systems. We got members involved in soliciting in-kind donations for things like materials and travel, and with the leadership team, we started cultivating long-term funding sources. We also developed relationships with technical assistance providers who would help us, over time, to establish a legal organization. Our recommendation is that in the beginning, as in the life of the organization or campaign, get people involved and don't get bogged down—move to action!

In the Conclusion and in Resource F, Creating a Legal Community Power-Building Organization, we review other things to consider about structuring your organization.

## What Is an Organizer and What Is the Role of an Organizer?

*An organizer builds a group of people or institutions to address a common problem through collective action. An organizer plays the role of convener, agitator, teacher, student, motivator, and coach.*

An organizer can be unpaid or paid. An organizer can gain formal training in an academy or be taught by his or her life experience. Some organizers start early on in their lives, others get into organizing later. Some organize for a short time, others for their entire careers. Organizers are students, mothers, fathers, young people, and seniors. Organizers are leaders themselves in the broader social justice movement.

Throughout this book, we describe the specific role of an organizer and how it is different from the role of member or leader of an organization. Essentially, an organizer meets people where they are and plays the role of an agitator, trying to get people to move to the most fruitful actions. For example, if a group of people working to stop a hazardous waste plant only want to write letters and circulate a petition, an organizer probes and questions their ideas. The organizer helps them evaluate their thinking and come up with actions that they feel comfortable doing that, unlike just holding a petition drive, have the potential to have a real impact.

If your organization is deciding what to do about a new economic-development project that will displace hundreds of families but promises to provide jobs, you get people to think critically. You ask enough questions and provide enough options that they engage in a serious conversation to weigh the costs and benefits of the proposal. Moreover, you don't sit back when a member makes a racist, sexist, homophobic, or other discriminatory remark. You engage that member in critical thinking and reflection.

As you move people in these ways, you bring them together, learn with them and from them, and like the coach of an athletic team, help them to achieve all that they are capable of.

### **Do I Need to Be from the Community I Want to Organize?**

*No. There are pros and cons to being from the community or being from outside of it.*

During welfare reform many women, particularly women of color on welfare, became leaders in local organizations and eventually, organizers. They brought new perspectives and tactics as well as urgency. They could motivate women on welfare in ways that other organizers could not. However, sometimes when a person organizes in her or his own community, it can be hard to move out of the role of being a member or leader to be in the role of an organizer.

On the other hand, organizers from outside the community can bring years of experience on other issues, a new perspective, fresh energy, and a more objective view of an issue or the political landscape. The challenges they sometimes face can include the need to take time to build trust and acceptance in a community and not understanding an issue at the gut level. Some organizers try to impose an organizing model on a situation where it just does not fit, or they may avoid experimenting with new ideas and the tactics that the community would like to use.

### **What Are Some of the Core Skills of an Organizer?**

*Throughout this book, we highlight the role and the skills of an organizer. You engage in fundamental tasks, such as facilitating meetings, conducting research, or developing strategy. The following are some of the core skills that make it possible for you to do these and other organizing tasks effectively.*

*Agitation.* Agitation is the skill of engaging in a dialogue that moves a person to action. You ask questions or suggest ideas that make someone a little uncomfortable. People “move” when they are uncomfortable—they do something to make the discomfort go away. They think or act differently. Effective agitation is

both a core skill and an art. It brings out tensions in a healthy and useful way. It is not meant to threaten or humiliate. Agitation gets to the motivations for change and empowerment that lie within individuals, meetings, organizations, and communities.

*Listening and learning.* Listening—to those with whom you agree and those with whom you don't—is necessary for creating social change. When you listen, you learn. You refine your ability to ask good questions that give you insight into people, relationships, problems, and issues. An organizer does not have all the answers. Organizers, members, and leaders learn from each other.

*Critical thinking.* You seek out information and think about what you hear and see. You look at all the angles to see where they lead. You form opinions, ideas, and insights. You learn to think on your feet and how to adapt when plans do not go perfectly well.

For example, although you can go to a training to learn the elements of a meeting agenda, you help members create the meeting they need to have by thinking critically about what they most need to get out of the meeting and assessing which members and leaders can develop by taking on different roles at the meeting. A simple tool to help you to develop the skill of critical thinking is to keep an organizer notebook. You can use this like a journal to write down thoughts and ideas as they come.

## **What Are Some Qualities That Organizers Have?**

*Since organizers are people from all walks of life, they bring a range of qualities to their work. The following are some we've observed in good organizers:*

- *Anger.* Organizers are angry about injustice. They channel anger to move people to action.
- *Flexibility.* Organizers are able to refocus and adapt to changing situations.
- *Sense of humor.* Having a sense of humor helps to diffuse conflict, relieve tense situations, and keep an organizer going for the long haul.
- *Fearlessness.* When organizers seek to dismantle institutions and systems that perpetuate inequality, they take real risks and must be unafraid of the consequences.
- *Ability to hear.* Good organizers are able to hear what people say and reflect on it.

- *Awareness of their own self-interest.* Organizers understand what they want to get out of a situation.
- *Ability to be self-critical and reflective.* Organizers are acutely able to think about what they've done and what they are doing and consider what could potentially happen if they take a course of action.
- *Willingness to share power.* Organizers have to be willing to give up power, let members make decisions, and ultimately be willing to win or to lose if that's where members' decisions lead.

## CHALLENGES TO GETTING STARTED

*"Other groups are working on the problem."* Investigate how other groups are addressing the same problem and if they are seeking a similar solution to the one you want to pursue. Keep in mind that people sometimes use the term "organizing" to describe methods other than base-building for power. You have to do your research. If they are using an approach other than organizing, your efforts could complement their work. If they are organizing effectively, make sure that your efforts do not replicate theirs. For example, focus on a different constituency or a different neighborhood.

*"People do not want to meet with us or don't think we can do what we say we want to do."* Start to build a track record. Do small-scale, limited action and bring constituent leaders into the meetings. Incremental accomplishments will help you get in the door.

*"We have no money for staff or other expenses."* If you are addressing a locally based problem, you need an issue, a focus, and people in order to raise money. Assess the amount of work you need to do and how much of a crisis you are in. If the problem needs to be addressed immediately, start with volunteers, build some accomplishments, and use these to leverage your fundraising efforts.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR GETTING STARTED

- ☑ *Get out in the field.* Don't sit in your home or office alone. Go out and talk to people. Connect with as wide and diverse a group as possible.

- ✓ *Be clear about what you want to do.* Both allies and constituents will respond more positively to a clear idea and vision than to something that is not well thought out or that is too complicated.
- ✓ *Ask for feedback and comments.* Having a vision does not mean that your project is static, especially in the beginning. Engage people with conversations that elicit their ideas and feedback.
- ✓ *Bring a leadership team together early.* Don't wait for the perfect leadership team. Start engaging constituents early, bringing people to meetings, having them lead discussion groups, and doing both short-term planning and long-term visioning.
- ✓ *Don't replicate good work.* If another organization is doing a good job of addressing your issue, position your efforts in a way that adds to the mix.

### Tool 1.1

#### Sample Phone Rap to Schedule Assessment Meetings

*You can use the following to schedule one-on-one meetings to assess whether or not you have a potential campaign or organization.*

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am calling because I am doing some work on \_\_\_\_\_ in the community. I've been working with a group of people who might want to organize to address this, and before we go deeper, we want to find out what others are doing and what they think about the problem. For example, how do you think this is all unfolding? Is there a need to organize people, or would a different strategy be better? Can we set up a meeting in the near future to talk about this? It would take between thirty minutes and an hour.

*If the person is tentative, mention who you have met with or how many people you are working with. Share any knowledge you have about the problem or about the person you are calling. If your initial group has done anything you can cite, talk about it.*

*Get a meeting commitment.*



## Tool 1.2

### Sample Community Organizing Assessment Tool

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*You can use the following as a guide for organizing assessment meetings:*

- Introduce yourself and thank the person for taking time to meet.
- Tell the person you are interested in working on a community problem but that before you do, you want to know who else is working on it and what they are doing. If you have met with other people, mention who you have met with, but don't talk about what these others have said. You want to hear what this person thinks.
- Engage the person in the following questions: What do you know about the problem? Who is currently working on it? Who else has worked on it in the past?
  - If anyone (including this person) is working on the problem, ask about how and what the goals are. Ask for specifics of what this person has accomplished, how, and with whom.
  - Ask for this person's analysis. What has worked, what has not, what could help address the problem better?
  - Ask this person for any other thoughts.
- Say briefly what you have done and what your thoughts are for addressing the problem. Remember, you are there to pick this person's brain, not to talk about your own work! Be clear if you are just exploring or if you are moving forward.
- Ask if there are any challenges you can expect moving forward.
- Ask if she or he is interested in being involved or helping to build the campaign or organization you are thinking about.
- Get her or his contact information: name, address, phone, e-mail.

#### **After the Meeting**

- Make sure you put the contact information in a database, including any notes you don't want to forget. (For more about keeping track of information using a database, see Chapter Six.)
- Set up meetings with anyone the person suggested.
- Send a thank-you note via e-mail or postal mail, telling the person how you will follow up.

### Tool 1.3

#### Six Ss for a Successful Meeting

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*You hold many meetings in organizing. Incorporate the following into every meeting. You can use this as a guide, handout, or checklist to train staff or members.*

1. **Sign in.** Everyone writes his or her name and contact information on a preprinted sheet with blank boxes or on a pad of paper. Signing in at the beginning of every organizational gathering not only brings in up-to-date contact information, it also reinforces the importance of *getting* contact information from everyone. It demonstrates to people who are there for the first time that the organization cares if they come back.
2. **Say “welcome.”** At every meeting, a member or leader has the specific role of welcoming new people, both as they come in and when they are together as a group.
3. **Say names.** Everyone goes around and says their name to open the meeting, even if there are a lot of people there. This brings everyone into the room, establishes equal footing with the facilitator and among experienced and new members, and helps people learn each others’ names. If time permits, people say why they are there, their role in the organization, what they hope to get from the meeting, or other orienting information. Name tags may not be necessary at every gathering, but if there are new people there, it helps orient everyone.
4. **Sit in a circle.** When people look at each other during the meeting, it supports dialogue and relationship-building.
5. **Secure the right space.** The meeting environment matters. For example, if the room is too big, people feel like the turnout is too small. If it’s too small, they want to leave. If it is clean and well ventilated, they’re at ease. If the floor is so dirty they don’t want to put their bags down, they may not come back. If the phone rings in the background, it gives the meeting a buzz. If the phone rings right next to the participants, it’s distracting. Pay attention to what will create the right space for the specific meeting.
6. **Share food.** Even if it’s only a plate of cookies, food bonds people, gives them physical energy, and creates a homey feeling. If the meeting occurs at meal times, try to serve real food of some kind or ask people to bring something to share.

## Exercise 1.1

### Visioning Exercise

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*You can use the following exercise to help a group of people begin to see what they want to accomplish together.*

**Time:** About one hour, depending on the number of people.

**Materials:** Props for the sculptures, such as hats or items connected with the issue.

**Roles:** Overall facilitator and facilitator for each group.

**Room set-up:** Movable chairs so small groups can gather. Enough wall space to tape the headlines to the wall or floor space for the sculptures.

- Facilitator puts participants into small groups of at least five and not more than seven people and asks someone to facilitate in each small group, possibly having prepared them in advance.
- Facilitator describes the goal: To create a vision of what we hope to do together to address the problem or issue we have identified.
- Facilitator describes the basic exercise: Participants will depict a vision of what the group will have accomplished in one year, in three years, and in ten years.

**There are two versions of this exercise:**

*You can use "headline futures," in which each small group writes a headline that the largest daily newspaper will write about the work of those who are gathered in one, three, and ten years. One advantage of this method is that you can post the headlines and really compare and dissect them. Alternatively, you can use a more active exercise where the small groups use themselves and a few props to create living sculptures of what they will have accomplished in one, three, and ten years. In a living sculpture, the participants arrange themselves in some formation, usually with one person serving to direct and place people in position.*

- Participants develop their headlines or sculptures; at the end of thirty minutes, each group posts and talks about its headlines or sculptures with the larger group for about three or four minutes.
- Debrief the exercise. The facilitator guides participants to go into what each headline or sculpture says and what it indicates more deeply. It can help people to see common issues or approaches. If people develop products that are about just winning the issue and less about continued work, this could give them a sense that they may want to focus on a campaign, not on building an organization. The facilitator uses what people create to ask pointed and clarifying questions such as, Does this word or gesture mean you see an organization forming out of the campaign? Why or why not? If you see an organization, what will keep this group working together into the future?

## Exercise 1.2

### Where Are We At?

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*You can use the following questions to guide a discussion with others in your community—or with a partner—about where you are at:*

- What have we done so far? Who have we talked with?
- What is our vision? Our worldview? What do we share and where are there differences?
- What have we learned from our actions and conversations?
- What more do we need to know in order to move our work forward?
- Who can gather this information?
- What specifically will each of us do? What are our individual and collective goals?
- What is our timeline for moving forward?