
Marshall Ganz' Framework PEOPLE, POWER AND CHANGE (Excerpted for TUSJ March 2022)

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Organizing can be learned as a leadership practice based on accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose under conditions of uncertainty: identifying, recruiting and developing leadership, building a constituency around that leadership, and transforming the resources of that constituency into the power they need to achieve their purposes.

There are five basic organizing leadership practices.

1. How to translate values into the motivation for action by learning to tell a story of why they were called to lead, a story of their constituency, and a story of an urgent challenge that requires action: self, us, and now.
2. How to build intentional relationships as the foundation of purposeful collective action.
3. How to structure a collaborative leadership team with shared purpose, ground rules and clear roles.
4. How to strategize turning the resources of one's constituency into the power needed to achieve clear goals.
5. How to secure commitments required to generate measurable, motivational, and effective action.

What is Leadership?

Leadership in organizing is rooted in three questions articulated by the first century Jerusalem sage, Rabbi Hillel:

“If I am not for myself, who am I?
When I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?”¹

These three questions focus on the interdependence of self, other, and action: what am I called to do, what are others with whom I am in relationship called to do, and what action does the world in which we live demand of us now?

The fact these are framed as questions, not answers, is important: to act is to enter a world of uncertainty, the unpredictable, and the contingent. Do we really think we can control it? Or do we have to learn to embrace it? Uncertainty poses challenges to the hands, the head and the heart. What new skills must my “hands” learn? How can my “head” devise new ways to use my resources to achieve my goals? How can my “heart” equip me with the courage, hopefulness, and forbearance to act?

Leadership requires “accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose under conditions of uncertainty”.² Conditions of uncertainty require the “adaptive” dimension of leadership: not so much performing known tasks well, but, rather learning what tasks are needed and performing them well. It is leadership from the perspective of a “learner” – one who has learned to ask the right questions – rather than that of a “knower” – on who thinks he or she knows all the answers. This kind of leadership is a form of practice - not a position or a person – and it can be exercised from any location within or without a structure of authority.

Leadership is taking responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose under conditions of uncertainty.

¹ Pirke Avot (Wisdom of the Fathers)

² Marshall Ganz, “Leading Change: Leadership, Organization and Social Movements”, Chapter 19,

We also take a particular approach to structuring leadership, a structure that enables us to develop the leadership of others, even as we exercise our own. Sometimes we think leadership is about being the person that everyone goes to.

How does it feel to be the dot in the middle of all those arrows? How does it feel to be one of the arrows that can't even get through? And what happens if the "dot" in the middle should disappear? Sometimes we think we don't need leadership at all because "we're all leaders", but that looks like this:

Who's responsible for coordinating everyone? And who's responsible for focusing on the good of the whole, not just one particular part? With whom does the "buck stop"?

Another way to practice leadership is like this "snowflake": leadership practices by developing other leaders who, in turn, develop other leaders, all the way "down". Although you may be the "dot" in the middle, your success depends on developing the leadership of others.

What is Organizing?

Organizing is a form of leadership that enables a constituency to turn its resources into the power to achieve its goals through recruitment, training, and development of leadership. Organizing is about equipping people (constituency) with the power (story and strategy) to make change (real outcomes).

PEOPLE: Organizing a constituency

The first question an organizer asks is not "what is my issue" but "who are my people" – who is my constituency. A constituency is a group of people who learn to "stand together" to decide, assert, and act upon their own goals. Organizing is not only about solving problems. It is about enabling the people with the problem to mobilize their own resources to solve it . . . and keep it solved.

POWER: What is it, where does it come from, how does it work?

Rev. Martin Luther King described power as the "ability to achieve purpose." We all require resources to achieve our purposes. Few if any of us control all the resources we need to achieve all our purposes. But your interest in my resources and my interest in your resources may give us a common interest in combining our resources to achieve a common purpose (power with). But if I need your resources more than you need my resources, you may be able to get what you need at my expense (power over). So power is not a thing, quality, or trait – it is the influence created by the relationship between interests and resources. You can "track down the power" asking—and getting the answers to—four questions:

1. What are the interests of your constituency?
2. Who holds the resources needed to address these interests?
3. What are the interests of the individuals or organizations who hold these resources?

4. What resources does your constituency hold which the other individuals or organizations need to address their interests?

Our power comes from people. Because powerlessness is the source of so many of the problems people face, organizing not only enables people to solve those problems, but also, by working together, to become more powerful people.

So organizing is not only a commitment to identify more leaders, but also a commitment to engage those leaders in building the power to create the change we need in our lives. Organizing power begins with a decision by the first person who wants to make it happen to commit. Without this commitment, there are no resources with which to begin. Commitment is as observable as action. The work of organizers begins with a decision to accept responsibility to challenge others to do the same.

CHANGE: What kind of change can organizing make?

What urgent problems do your people face? How might the world look different if those problems were solved? What first steps can they take to begin solving those problems? Change is specific, concrete, and significant. It requires focus on a goal that will make a real difference that we can see. It is not about “creating awareness”, having a meaningful conversation, or giving a great speech. It is about specifying a clearly visible goal, explaining why achieving that goal can make a real difference in meeting the challenge that your constituency has to face, and making it happen.

1. Creating Shared Story:

Organizing is motivated by shared values expressed through public narrative. By learning the craft of public narrative we can access our shared values for the emotional resources we need to respond to challenges with courage rather than reacting to them with fear. By learning to tell stories of sources of our own values, a “story of self”, we enable people to “get us”. By telling stories of the sources of values we share, a “story of us”, we enable people to “get” each other. By recognizing the current moment as one of urgent choice and proposing a hopeful way forward, a “story of now”, we motivate action. Values-based organizing—in contrast to issue-based organizing—invites people to escape their “issue silos” and come together so that their diversity becomes an asset, rather than an obstacle. By learning how to tell a public narrative that bridges the self, us, and now, organizers enhance their own efficacy and create trust and solidarity within their campaign, equipping them to engage others far more effectively.

2. Creating Shared Relational Commitment:

Organizing is based on relationships and creating mutual commitments to work together. It is the process of association—not simply aggregation—that makes a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Through association we can learn to recast our individual interests as common interests, identify values we share, and envision objectives that we can use our combined resources to achieve. And because it makes us more likely to act to assert those interests, relationship building goes far beyond delivering a message, extracting a contribution, or

soliciting a vote. Relationships built as a result of one-on-one meetings create the foundation of local campaign teams, and they are rooted in commitments people make to each other, not simply commitment to an idea, task, or issue.

3. Creating Shared Structure

A team leadership structure can enable organizing that grows stronger through collaborative and cascading leadership development. Volunteer efforts often flounder due to a failure to develop reliable, consistent, and creative individual leaders. Structured leadership teams encourage stability, motivation, creativity, and accountability—and use volunteer time, skills, and effort effectively. They create a structure within which energized volunteers can accomplish challenging work. Real teams can achieve the goals they set for themselves, grow more effective as a team over time, and enable the growth, development and learning of their individual members. Effective leadership teams must be bounded, stable, and diverse. They must agree on a shared purpose, clear norms, and specific roles.

4. Creating Shared Strategy

Although based on broad values, effective organizing campaigns focus on a clear strategic objective, a way to turn those values into action; e.g., desegregate buses in Montgomery, Alabama; getting to 100% clean electricity; etc. Trans-local campaigns locate responsibility for strategy at the top (or at the center), but are able to “chunk out” strategic objectives in time (deadlines) and space (local areas) as a campaign, allowing significant local responsibility for figuring out how to achieve those objectives. Responsibility for strategizing local objectives empowers, motivates and invests local teams.

5. Creating Shared Measurable Action

Organizing outcomes must be clear, measurable, and specific if progress is to be evaluated, accountability practiced, and strategy adapted based on experience. Measures may include volunteers recruited, money raised, people at a meeting, voters contacted, pledge cards signed, laws passed, etc. Although electoral campaigns enjoy the advantage of very clear outcome measures, any effective organizing drive must come up with the equivalent. Regular reporting of progress to goal creates opportunity for feedback, learning, and adaptation. Training must be provided for all skills (e.g., holding house meetings, phone banking, etc.) to carry out the program. Social media may help enable reporting, feedback, coordination. Transparency must exist as to how individuals, groups, and the campaign as a whole are doing with regard to their progress toward their goal.
